Original Research Article

Compromiso, Pertenencia, and Empoderamiento: How Faculty at a Fronterizx HSI Perceive and Enact Servingness to Become Empowerment Agents for Latinx Student Success

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Abstract

Semi-structured interviews with 22 faculty at a fronterizx HSI located at the U.S.-Mexico border revealed the ways faculty perceive, enact, and engage with servingness practice. Findings provide critical insights into the relationship between servingness and faculty as empowerment agents through three culturally relevant themes: *compromiso, pertenencia,* and *empoderamiento*. Specifically, participants' conceptualizations of servingness, based on practice, advanced perspectives and enactments of Latinx student support that helped transform their institution to more aptly serve both the academic and non-academic outcomes of Latinx students. Findings raise implications for research and practice.

Resumen

Entrevistas semiestructuradas con 22 profesores de una HSI fronterizx ubicada en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México revelaron las formas en que los profesores perciben, representan y participan en la práctica del servicio. Los resultados brindan crítica sobre la relación entre el servicio y el profesorado como agentes de empoderamiento a través de tres temas culturalmente relevantes: compromiso, pertenencia y empoderamiento. Específicamente, las conceptualizaciones de servicio

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de los participantes, basadas en la práctica, avanzaron perspectivas y promulgaciones de apoyo a los estudiantes Latinx que ayudaron a transformar su institución para servir de manera más adecuada a los resultados académicos y no académicos de los estudiantes Latinx. Los hallazgos plantean implicaciones para la investigación y la práctica.

Keywords
HSI, servingness, faculty, empowerment agents

As members of the largest minoritized group and the fastest-growing population in the United States, Latinx[1] students are entering higher education at increasing rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Sixty-six percent of all Latinx undergraduate students are enrolled in Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) (Excelencia in Education, 2022). HSI is a federal construct established in 1992 due to Latinx advocacy efforts and refers to not-for-profit, 2- or 4-year degree-granting institutions that enroll a minimum of 25% Latinx undergraduate students (Valdez, 2015).

Historically, HSIs are underfunded and lack the institutional capacity to meet the needs of the primarily low-income, predominantly first-generation, underrepresented students that they serve (Santiago et al., 2016). Moreover, because the federal government has yet to specify the meaning, structures, and outcomes that constitute "serving" in HSIs (Santiago et al., 2016), there is concern that a number of institutions merely enroll rather than truly serve Latinx students (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019). Such concerns have increased due to the advent of Hispanic-Serving Research Institutions (HSRIs) that meet both research active (R1) and HSI status (Marin, 2019) and are often historically white and highly selective. Consequently, there is real potential for "business as usual" institutional logic characterized by prestige seeking and color-blind practices that eclipse necessary efforts to transform higher education to serve and support an increasingly diverse student body (G. A. Garcia, 2023; G. A. Garcia et al., 2019; Marin, 2019).

In the absence of a federal definition, a small but growing body of research has sought to broadly conceptualize what it means to serve Latinx students at HSIs. The difficulty in doing so cannot be underestimated, given the variation in type, funding mechanisms, and geography of HSIs (Núñez et al., 2016). Nonetheless, G. A. Garcia et al.'s (2019) multidimensional conceptual framework of servingness offers the most widely recognized definition of what the "S" in HSI means with regard to Latinx students. According to the framework, indicators of servingness can occur at the level of the individual (e.g., academic and non-academic outcomes) and the organization (e.g., mission and strategic plans). External indicators come from external bodies (e.g., legislation) as well as historical forces (e.g., white supremacy). Ultimately, the multidimensional framework offers a heuristic to help researchers, policymakers, and practitioners understand the various indicators of servingness that can be at work in an

institution, including internal structures, academic outcomes, nonacademic outcomes, validating experiences, racialized experiences, and external influences. G. A. Garcia (2023) further argues for a particularized conceptualization of servingness with regard to the transformed HSI designation (i.e., Chicana HSI, Afro HSI, Indigenous HSI, Boricua HSI, Fronterizo HSI) in order to address the specific needs of its students and, in turn, to elevate the intersectional identities of it students as part of a broader HSI organizational identity.

To date, most research on servingness in the contexts of HSIs focuses on what it means to serve students (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019). The focus on students is critical, as student outcomes are the foremost priority of servingness. Yet, equally important are the processes, or "indicators of servingness," leading to these outcomes, such as organizational culture, campus climate, and leadership (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019). To this point, G. A. Garcia (2023) contends that if HSIs "do not figure out how to conceptualize and enact servingness in practice, they will ultimately fail their Latinx and low-income students" (p. 2). For these processes or indicators (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019) to lead to successful outcomes, a culture of intentionality is needed (Kezar, 2019). Herein, intentionality means meeting students where they are, setting high expectations for success, and tailoring programs to students' needs (Kezar, 2019). Often, institutional stakeholders at HSIs (i.e., administration, faculty, and staff) do not quite know how to do this because of the exigencies to seek legitimacy "by conforming to external pressures within the field of higher education, modeling similar organizations based on mimetic processes, and adopting normative standards set by professional organizations" (G. A. Garcia, 2019, p. 29). Thus, for HSIs to make changes to support meaningful and robust academic outcomes for Latinx students requires major transformations to the institution, including expanding the idea of faculty as institutional stakeholders to empowerment agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Empowerment agents are institutional change agents who use their institutional and social capital to change the world rather than simply "widening the pipeline" (p. x).

To better understand the potential relationship between faculty perceptions and enactments of servingness and the role of empowerment agents in institutional transformation, this exploratory qualitative study addresses the following research questions: How do faculty perceive servingness at a fronterizx HSI located at the U.S.-Mexico border? How do faculty at a fronterizx HSI located at the U.S.-Mexico border enact servingness to become empowerment agents? In exploring the connections between the significance of faculty as empowerment agents for Latinx student success, we center the geographical and cultural significance of the border to conceptualizations of servingness within the context of the fronterizx HSI. More specifically, we recognize the importance of examining the border context within an HSI due to its binational, bicultural, and bilingual existence in promoting an overall HSI consciousness (Villarreal, 2022). Hence, we refer to our setting as a fronterizx HSI as we seek to highlight the assets of its students and faculty, as well as to address the needs of the local population. Findings provide critical insights into the relationship between servingness and faculty as empowerment agents through three culturally relevant themes that represent three situated, culturally responsive ways this fronterizx

HSI operationalizes indicators of servingness: *compromiso*, *pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento*. In essence, these three themes are examples of *how* institutional agents interpret and operationalize key elements of G. A. Garcia et al.'s (2019) multi-dimensional framework; specifically, serving structures, validating experiences, and student outcomes. In the section that follows, we elaborate on the concept of empowerment agent as the primary theoretical lens informing this study. Next, we provide a brief literature review on examples of how faculty act as empowerment agents to support Latinx student success. We then present methods and findings. We conclude with a discussion that includes implications for research and practice.

Literature Review

To date, there is literature that provides examples of faculty who act as empowerment agents for Latinx student success. Some of this literature engages with servingess as a part of what it means to be an empowerment agent, while most of it does not. Across the literature, there is a shared commitment to transforming "business as usual" to advance Latinx student success, with varying degrees of criticality. In what follows, we present key themes that reflect the primary foci found in this literature: fostering Latinx student success, faculty as empowerment agents, and the role of faculty mentorship.

At the broader level, scholarly work has explored what it means to encourage and facilitate college success for Latinx students among HSIs. Common areas of consensus relative to fostering Latinx student success have been identified as (1) Latinx students need guidance in knowing how to navigate the educational pipeline; (2) there is a need to hire more Latinx faculty and provide greater cultural competency training; and (3) it is crucial to engage the Latinx families and greater Latinx community to promote student success (Gooden & Martin, 2014). Similarly, it is of utmost relevance for faculty to take part in the role of advancing students' learning, development, and success. As such, it is crucial for faculty to understand and address Latinx student confidence, self-esteem, and college preparation, along with the effects of family and the surrounding culture (Ching, 2022).

More specifically, faculty act as empowerment agents when they intentionally work to develop pedagogical stances and practices that advocate for social equity. Early literature suggests that this requires faculty to engage in intentional self-reflexivity through an intersectional lens to create a more inclusive learning environment for Latinx students since critical identity-work on the part of faculty can foster connection with students from similarly heterogeneous backgrounds (Núñez et al., 2010). Moreover, faculty may better promote change as they reflect on their teaching philosophies and pedagogical stance. Reflecting on aspects such as the following is likely to empower faculty to promote greater Latinx student success: (a) understanding the complexity of Latinx student identity; (b) moving from a deficit to an asset-based perspective; (c) promoting student-peer communities; (d) incorporating culturally relevant curricula; (e) implementing culturally responsive teaching practices; and (f) increasing faculty agency and support structures (Krsmanovic, 2021).

Faculty also act as empowerment agents when the curriculum can be tailored to suit the needs of the Latinx student population within HSIs. Literature highlights how adopting a humanistic scholarship that embraces indigeneity within HSIs can emphasize a stronger Latinx identity and, thus, greater Latinx student achievement (Castro Samayoa et al., 2018). Similarly, culturally relevant pedagogical practices that reflect the students' culture help better serve under-represented students through programs that consider their needs (G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Additionally, using the languaging practices that reflect those that Latinx students implement on a habitual basis is a valuable pedagogical tool (Cavazos & Musanti, 2021). As such, these bilingual practices and courses promote a safe space in seeking to create a more inclusive higher education environment for Latinx students (Cedeño & Schwarzer, 2022).

There is also literature that demonstrates how faculty can serve as empowerment agents by adopting equity praxis so that faculty research is informed by and addresses issues most important to the surrounding community; for example, the disconnect between K-12 schooling and higher education that is the result of a hidden agenda, which promotes assimilation to dominant white, liberal ideologies. In doing so, faculty intentionally connect theory and praxis to center community needs as integral to the purposes of higher education and the post-secondary success of Latinx students (Ruiz & Valverde, 2012).

Lastly, scholarly discussion has emphasized the role of faculty as empowerment agents for Latinx student success through means of mentoring (Salinas et al., 2020). This literature discusses the importance of mentoring undergraduate researchers and young scholars and urges faculty to interact, listen to, and understand students' backgrounds and interests in striving for greater academic pathways (Estepp et al., 2017). This work has also emphasized culturally responsive approaches to encourage undergraduate Latinx students to pursue graduate education. The role of faculty members who reflect the Latinx students' ethnic identity becomes critical to the meaningful engagement of Latinx students in pursuing further academic endeavors. This reflects scholarly work that discusses a greater preference of Latinx students for role models and mentors that reflect their ethnic identity and, in turn, reflect their languaging practices, resulting in greater academic achievement (Preuss et al., 2020; Salinas & Rodríguez, 2023).

Literature around mentoring as an empowerment tool has also explored the broader visions toward servingness for administrators and stakeholders. Despite the challenges associated with mentoring, including lack of funding, siloed organizational structures, program evaluation constraints, bureaucracy, and a lack of engagement (Covarrubias et al., 2023), the strengths outweigh them. Mentoring as an empowerment tool is likely to promote a greater sense of belonging for Latinx students as well as encourage high-impact practices that are likely to encourage greater academic experiences and outcomes for Latinx students in higher education (Covarrubias et al., 2023).

In sum, there is literature that explores the importance of encouraging Latinx student success among HSIs. Scholarly work also depicts curricular and pedagogical stances and practices, along with mentoring, to portray how faculty may serve as empowerment agents toward Latinx student success. Across this literature, there is a

shared commitment to transforming "business as usual" to promote greater Latinx student success. Nonetheless, missing from this literature is an explicit and intentional analysis of how faculty perceptions and enactments of servingness at a fronterizx HSI orient them toward becoming and acting as empowerment agents who transform the institution to propel the academic and non-academic outcomes of Latinx students.

Theoretical Framework

Due to the situatedness of our study, borderlands theory is at the core. In her seminal work, Anzaldúa (1987) viewed the borderlands as a third space, where two or more cultures meet and where people from different backgrounds interact with one another. Thus, understandings derive from various people coming together to form "a border culture" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25). Inhabiting the border denotes what Anzaldúa (1987) referred to as mestizo/a consciousness, which centers on embracing a strong sense of rootedness and a "tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 79). As such, mestizo/a consciousness represents the possibility for individuals and communities to be shaped by place and, in turn, to shape that place. Within the context of fronterizx HSIs, borderland consciousness represents the significance of place to defining servingness. Hence, being located in the borderlands represents the significance of a mestizo/a consciousness moving faculty from institutional change agents to empowerment agents for Latinx student success. Yet, we remain mindful of the contradictions and limitations of borderlands theory, including its erasure of Indigenous experiences and romanticization of colonization (Urrieta, 2003). We are conscious of these contradicting truths/realities in our operationalization of borderlands theory.

The term institutional agents refers to non-kin adults who draw on their institutional resources and social capital to support the academic trajectories of historically underserved students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Faculty often serve as institutional agents by creating "resource-full" relationships through which students experience socialization to higher education and the field of study via mentoring and exposure to new social worlds embedded in faculty social networks. This framework of socialization represents the status attainment tradition since it does not account for social relations and structures that perpetuate systemic inequities in education and society. Following, it is not enough for faculty to operate as institutional agents in the context of servingness at HSIs, since this model of socialization is predicated on the very same liberal ideologies that maintain the institutional status quo.

In contrast, empowerment agents represent institutional change agents who orient their institutional resources and social networks toward "counter stratification" (acting to counter unequal structures) and the empowerment of historically underserved students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1085). According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), empowerment is a transitional and transformative process "from a state of little power and an existence framed by obstacles, forms of oppression, and blocked access to societal resources to a state where individuals and communities become socially engaged in ways where they strategically mobilize to access the resources and to exercise power so as to self-determine their very destiny" (p. 1091). In contrast with the notion of

institutional support attached to the idea of the institutional change agent, an empowerment agent goes further in five distinct ways (Stanton-Salazar, 2011): (1) their ability to problematize the success of low-status students (e.g., awareness of low financial resources, flawed recruitment and retention efforts); (2) their level of critical awareness around institutional support; (3) their willingness to go outside of the established rules of the institutional hierarchy; (4) their identity as advocates for change, not just for increasing student representation; and (5) their willingness to be publicly recognized as an advocate or change agent. It can be said that these characteristics of the empowerment agent serve a similar heuristic role to G. A. Garcia et al.'s (2019) multidimensional framework. The five proposed characteristics can be adapted to specific contexts and situations. Hence, these characteristics and distinctions are important to our analysis of the ways faculty perceive servingness at a fronterizx HSI.

Since higher education has historically been a space of exclusion and stratification, empowerment agents must commit to fostering trust, solidarity, and shared meaning with students who have been consistently mistreated and ill-served by education and society. Empowerment agents must also be "willing to disembed themselves from the reproductive practices of their institution or environment and to become a moral agent for positive change in the world that both the agent and youth inhabit, e.g., university campus" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1090). Rooted in critical social work and in the liberatory work of Paulo Freire, the theoretical construct of empowerment agents provides a lens through which to explore, understand, and advance faculty perspectives and enactments of servingness that hold the potential to transform the institutions to achieve "racial equity in academic, economic, and postgraduation outcomes as well as outcomes that advance social justice and collective liberation" (G. A. Garcia, 2023, p. 7). As such, we used empowerment agents as our theoretical lens to make sense of faculty perceptions and enactments of servingness that were aimed at transforming the institution to more aptly serve the academic and non-academic outcomes of Latinx students.

Methodology

As part of a larger exploratory mixed-methods study, this article highlights data from qualitative interviews with faculty to shed light on the under-explored local meaning and practices of servingness at a fronterizx HSI—a majority Mexican-American institution located at the U.S.-Mexico border. The overarching research questions guiding this study were: (1) How do faculty perceive servingness at a fronterizx HSI located at the U.S.-Mexico border? And (2) How do faculty at a fronterizx HSI located at the U.S.-Mexico border enact servingness to become empowerment agents?

Data Collection

To explore how faculty understand and experience servingness, we administered an Institutional Review Board-approved survey followed by one-on-one virtual interviews. The electronically administered survey was emailed to all faculty and students

Table 1. Participant Information.

Participant	Professor role	Gender	Ethnicity	Discipline
Billy	Assistant	Male	White	Law
Carmen	Associate	Female	Latina	Physical Therapy
Dan Lee	Associate	Male	Asian-Indian	Physical Therapy
Donna	Assistant	Female	Mexican American	Music
Dustin	Associate	Male	White	Computer Science
Edwin	Associate	Male	Latino	Engineering
Erin	Assistant	Female	White	Physics
Esthela	Associate	Female	Latina	Social Work
Jeff	Associate	Male	African-American	Geological Sciences
Jennica	Associate	Female	White	Education
Kathy	Assistant	Female	White	Education
Lauren	Assistant	Female	Latina	Chemistry
Liam	Associate	Male	White	Marketing
Marcos	Associate	Male	Latino	Liberal Arts
Marie	Assistant	Female	African-American	Political Science
Petra	Assistant	Female	Latina	Physical Therapy
Rachel	Assistant	Female	White	Health Sciences
Ruth	Assistant	Female	White	Computer Science
Shawn	Associate	Male	White	Engineering
Skyler	Associate	Male	Latino	Music
Tatiana	Assistant	Female	Latina	Education
Todd	Associate	Male	White	Education

who were 18 years or older at the time of the study. The survey included a link to an approved Human Subjects consent form and a space to indicate interest in participating in a follow-up interview.

Of the 75 completed surveys, 53 respondents expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Ultimately, 22 faculty and 14 students (36 total respondents) completed the interview. Since this article focuses on faculty perceptions, we focus on the 22 faculty interviews. Table 1 presents participant profiles as self-identified by participants.

Because of our interest in understanding the context-specific meanings and experiences of servingness among faculty, we employed semi-structured interviews to inquire about participants' perceptions and enactment of servingness in the context of a fronterizx HSI, as well as in relationship to the surrounding borderland region. Interviews were audio recorded, conducted via Zoom in both English and Spanish, and lasted between 30 and 45 min. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed manually by members of the research team. Data analysis was guided by open and focused coding, along with analytic memos (Saldaña,

2016). We followed with cross-comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014) and peer member checking as we identified themes and common patterns across the data (Merriam, 2002). Thus, we identified, analyzed, and reported on particular patterns within the data as derived from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following themes were regarded as central to how faculty made sense of and enacted servingness at a fronterizx HSI: *compromiso, pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento*. While these findings are qualitative in nature and not generalizable, they contribute to the research and practice of servingness across fronterizx HSI contexts. In particular, we draw attention to the themes and processes rather than the outcomes of faculty efforts and perceptions.

Research Context

This study took place at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), an R1, open access public university situated at the furthest western point in Texas, where New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico meet along the Rio Grande. This borderland region has the lowest median income in Texas, and authorized border crossings are a crucial feature of this context. Many students who engage in habitual border crossings are U.S. citizens with Mexican ethnic backgrounds (Falcón Orta & Orta Falcón, 2018) or are authorized border commuters under an eligible student VISA status (i.e., F1 student VISA). These students are frequently referred to in the literature as *transfronterizx* students (de la Piedra & Guerra, 2012; Relaño Pastor, 2007). For *transfronterizx* students, transborder interactions are a common way of life (Chávez Montaño, 2006; Relaño Pastor, 2007). Moreover, students' ties to both nations, along with their transborder interactions, are crucial experiences that contribute to their cultural identities and lives (Falcón Orta & Orta Falcón, 2018). Nonetheless, these students face a number of challenges, including the time involved in crossing the border (Convertino, 2018). As a result, faculty need to understand the ways in which a mestizo consciousness is critical to understanding the complex lives of *transfronterizx* college students and, in turn, serving as empowerment agents.

In 1980, the UTEP administration sought to transform the predominantly White institution (PWI) into a public university that reflected the bilingual, bi-cultural, binational borderland population. In 1992, UTEP was officially designated an HSI, although in terms of enrollment, it had reflected one for over a decade. As of 2023, total student enrollment stood at 23,880, including 88% (17,696) Latinx undergraduate students, 66% (2,444) Latinx graduate students, 23% (4,659) Latinx first-generation undergraduate students, and 28% (1,053) Latinx first-generation graduate students. Five percent (1,259) of the student body are *transfronterizx* students or daily border commuters. Fifty-nine percent (11,907) receive economic support through the Pell Grant. Overall, the UTEP student body is predominantly bicultural, bilingual, and holds binational roots, cultural customs, and linguistic practices.

With regard to faculty diversity, an estimated 40.2% (589) are White non-Hispanic faculty; 39.5% (579) faculty are Latinx; 8.3% (122) are Asian American; 7.4% (109) are designated as International; 1.91% (28) faculty are Black non-Hispanic; 1.3% (19) are faculty of two or more races; 1.09% (16) faculty are unaware of their ethnicity/

race; and one faculty member identifies as Native American. The faculty includes individuals who are entirely Spanish and English bilingual; this is especially true among Latinx faculty. Due to the languaging practices (O. García & Wei, 2014) that occur habitually among and between bilingual faculty and students, translanguaging is a common practice in our setting (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; O. García, 2009).

Positionality and Trustworthiness

It is pertinent for qualitative researchers to position themselves in a conscious manner with regard to the biases, values, and experiences that they bring to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Researchers' experiences and identities may provide assets that can help them understand participant experiences, and they can also limit and create biases in analysis and interpretation. The first author is of Mexican descent and grew up in the borderlands, similar to many of the participants. The second author is also of Mexican descent and has lived in the borderlands for a substantial amount of time. The third author is of Irish-settler descent and grew up at the northeastern border of the United States and Canada but has lived in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands for her entire adult life. The fourth author is also of Mexican descent and has engaged in ongoing migration between the United States and Mexico since an early age. These experiences become essential as we frame our study around an interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

All phases of the study were subject to scrutiny and review by a broader, seven-member research team (of which all authors are members). The authors considered both insider and outsider perspectives as derived from their own experiences and those of the broader research team who looked for omissions and inconsistencies and offered recommendations that contribute to the robustness of this study.

Findings

Interviews with 22 faculty generated three salient, culturally relevant themes: *compromiso, pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento*. The themes represent the meaning participants attributed to servingness within the context of their work. This meaning was drawn out from questions asking for participants to explain how they understand servingness, denotatively, and how they experience or enact servingness through concrete policies or actions. These terms are in Spanish because, as such, they align more closely with the context of a fronterizx HSI. Building on work by Cavazos and Musanti (2021) and Cedeño and Schwarzer (2022), the research team sought intentionally to seek out the situated meanings of the themes based on the local context and community. Each theme is described below.

Compromiso

Participants described the term HSI as a sort of dry, administrative term that did not comprehensively reflect the cultural richness of what they actually do. Servingness,

for participants, represented an opportunity to become and remain socially embedded by serving the local community and preparing students to serve the communities they come from. As shared by Carmen, a Latina clinical faculty member:

> Working at UTEP, and my life at UTEP, and what I'm trying to create for the students, certainly the idea of serving our community, and our student demographics, both of which are Hispanic in reality, so we have really developed our . . . program on that idea, that we are trying to produce graduates that could serve this community, or communities like them.

Participants viewed their institution as one that propelled the next generation of Latinx leaders. Hence, the relationships faculty built with the community and with students demonstrated the notion of *compromiso*. In the Spanish sense of the term, *compromiso* connotes a strong sense of responsibility to a set of values, to a person, or to a community. For participants, this responsibility manifested in a two-way relationship between the community and the institution. As shared by Carmen:

> I was acculturated that serving our community was not just words, that it was just part of our DNA, and so it's sort of the natural thing that if we're serving our community, which is a Hispanic majority of students, which represents our community demographically, that all those things go together.

This responsibility came from a place of understanding, where faculty strived to place themselves in the shoes of students to the greatest extent possible. In doing this, they invested themselves in the local community, ideally reinforcing its value to the students. According to Donna, a Mexican American tenured faculty member:

> I just see the visibility of the university demonstrating that this part of servingness is important for here today, and I know that the university really feels like its number one constituency is this city and this region, Juarez, El Paso, New Mexico . . . and this HSI, it's just a really important role, but I think everybody notices it, and kind of expects it. I think it's our duty to do it, sorry if that's too strong, but I think that's what we're supposed to be doing.

Compromiso went beyond the individual. As stated by Esthela, a Latina tenured faculty member, "it's not only about the 'you,' it's about the community, it's about the 'we,' it's like a family." Participants often used the analogy of family to explain the recognition that servingness is a system approach. As shared by Dustin, a tenured White faculty member:

> We're probably the biggest or one of the biggest employers in the region, we are the probably only supplier of teachers for our region, and so if you think about kids growing up here, whether they know it or not, they're products of UTEP, and so we serve our community in that way too . . .

In their responses, participants recognized the important function their institution performed for the region. As shared by Rachel, a White clinical faculty member:

> A lot of our graduates stay in the area and are able, then, to serve the needs of the community, and the region, and so by keeping more of our grads here, and are able to educate people in this area, who otherwise may not get the opportunity to get an education, I think that's an area that we are uniquely able to, and to not only do, but to build on, to be able to create a better tomorrow for everybody in our area.

Students served by the institution were predominantly from the region and stayed in the region. Faculty viewed this tendency as a strength. According to Kathy, a White tenured faculty member:

> I believe that the more that we engage in servingness, the more students succeed. I think the more we engage in servingness, the more our region will succeed or our region will benefit the more that we address our region as a partner with many assets and resources that are not ours to use but that we want to support and encourage, and develop, and stand for, and defend, the better we do as an institution, the better the region does as a region, and the healthier we are as a community.

In this way, the institution's *compromiso* to servingness leveraged and was responsive to its location. Participants enacted servingness when they consciously integrated programs and curricula that were responsive to students' sociopolitical and geographic location. As stated by Kathy:

> I really appreciate the clear articulation of this location as an asset, and that, to whatever extent that we do that, is important. I think the sort of systems and acknowledgement of students for accommodations, not accommodations, but programs to support students in Juarez, who either cross for classes, or you know, supporting students who need work Visas . . . all of that stuff is a really important component of what we do, that is informed by our location.

Faculty perceived and enacted servingness as a commitment and responsibility for leveraging their place along the US-Mexico border. *Compromiso* pertained to the immediate situatedness of our bicultural, binational context. By framing their place as an asset, participants aimed to transform the way students thought about themselves and their community. As such, servingness pivoted around and was molded by our location and was both a product and a purpose for striving to enhance Latinx student success.

Pertenencia

Participants viewed servingness not only as embedded within the culture of the institution, but also as rooted within Hispanic culture. Participants viewed servingness as a moral imperative related to cultivating a culture of belonging. As stated by Lauren, a Latina tenured faculty member:

> I think our students make me feel like I'm in the right place. Our demographics, the fact that we accept Hispanic students, and that we have 90% Hispanic students . . . it's just a weird welcomeness piece that I think you're looking for.

In Spanish, *pertenencia* is very similar to notions of belonging. It involves subjective identification by an individual who perceives safety and acceptance. According to Marcos, a Latino tenured faculty member: "I don't know how quite to articulate this, but we've created, we as a community, staff in particular, have created a community in which Hispanic students feel at home . . . this is an institution that is very warm and welcoming." Procuring a sense of belonging for students was a matter of importance. Hence, culture and language were embedded throughout all functions of the institution. As Marcos shared:

> You hear Spanish spoken all day long, everywhere, every corner of this campus, it permeates our institution, so that's remarkable, and how we've gotten there is because we feel that most part of the people working here, again emphasizing staff, because they're the interface, they're the interface for so many students, whether it's the parking office, to the advising office, they feel comfortable here. I've never heard a student say that they've experienced a micro-aggression . . . because of their Hispanic identity.

Faculty and staff representation and identification with students' ethnic identities helped foster a sense of belonging. As stated by Marie, an African-American tenured faculty member: "I think students feel like they belong because they see themselves in faculty, and in staff that work here." Servingness, in many ways, was related to *pertenencia* through representation. In a region where demographics have effectively flipped from a White majority to a Latinx majority, representation was important in a unique way. For faculty, it was not simply a matter of numbers. Servingness in this context paid attention to roles and leadership positions, among other factors. According to Lauren:

> Because I'm a Latina, and I'm from El Paso . . . I think my presence in the faculty matters because they see me, so just by being there I feel I'm a role model. I also feel responsible to be the voice of some of our students.

Faculty mirrored the demographics of the student population, and many were able to communicate with students in English and Spanish. Additionally, faculty generally shared a sense of belonging to the region, not just through employment, but also through upbringing. According to Ruth, a White tenure track faculty member:

> So, to me, it really seems like that's the sub-text around here, and also something that people around here take for granted, and I think that so many of the faculty and staff at UTEP are born and raised in El Paso, which I think is unique, you don't see that in many institutions, and so I think it's just part of the sub-text.

Participants recognized a sense of belonging even among employees of the university, given their ties to the region. Employees tended to be graduates of the institution or

residents of the region who went away for school or work but returned as professionals for the purpose of giving back to their community. As Edwin, a Latino adjunct faculty member, similarly shared:

> I think that we certainly have a better handle when we have faculty that we have either prepared from the university, or faculty that has strong practice experience. So at the end of the day, faculty begins to look like the community we serve, and when we try to do that, I think that is a very powerful piece.

Through notions of servingness, participants demonstrated an awareness of *pertenencia* as a strategy, not just a subjective perception. *Pertenencia* represented an opportunity for engaging servingness in practice, as fostering a culturally responsive sense of belonging enabled participants to empower a predominantly, historically underserved student body through language, representation, and identification. As stated by Tatiana, a Latina tenure track faculty member:

> I think it's an integral part of the university's mission. I don't think that given the population of who we serve, because we're mostly a commuter school, because most of our student population is first in their family, I don't think that we can shorten it. I think it's a very, I think it's a moral responsibility. I think it's a moral obligation because of who our students are and because a university degree becomes so transformative to their lives and to their future that I think it really needs to permeate everything we do.

Servingness, for participants, entailed challenging the colorblind institutional status quo by centering the experiences and identities of students to facilitate a culture of belonging or *pertenencia*. Given the minority-majority demographics of the institution, enacting servingness as *pertenencia* was of utmost importance for empowering student success. Interpreting actions toward belonging as *pertenencia* prompted faculty to ask not just how they could help students adapt to institutional structures, but also how institutional structures could adapt to students and their community priorities.

Empoderamiento

Participants saw servingness as a practice of individualization and empowerment for student success. *Empoderamiento*, for participants, implied strengthening students' capabilities, confidence, and vision for the purpose of stimulating positive changes in their lives. According to Lauren:

> [Students] have a hard time sort of navigating the system, and that's not servingness, you know. Just 'cause we admit them doesn't mean that we're serving them, and that's probably the most important thing I would say to you, just because we admit them does not mean we are serving them.

Participants challenged conceptualizations of servingness that centered on enrollment numbers. Instead, they focused on institutional efforts that personalized student

support and empowered students to succeed by remaining responsive to their needs. As shared by Liam, a White tenured faculty member: "Servingness, from what I understand, is that we as faculty try to optimize the learning situation for our students, and with an understanding of some of the particular challenges they might face." Dustin similarly shared:

> It's serving our students individually and understanding and helping them with not just learning the curriculum, but with helping them with their lives . . . I've tried to do this personally, adapting our teaching approach to the circumstances of our students. [Students] almost all work, and they don't have a lot of time for things like extracurricular activities, and to a certain extent, they don't have a lot of time for homework either, so I personally have worked to flip most of my classes, so that a lot of what would have been homework occurs in class, where they can get help from each other and the instructors . . .

Servingness necessitated a willingness to adapt to changing student circumstances to support their success. Servingness required a substantial level of deep listening, awareness, and understanding of students, followed by accommodations to strengthen their opportunities for success. As Marcos shared:

> Well, [servingness] means, to me, a variation of the idea of servant leadership, in which the institution and the people that are in the institution see themselves in the role of serving a constituency that has been less than fully served in the past, and in this case, it's a Hispanic serving, but I can see the implications of servingness in serving certain leadership, which is humble leadership that accounts for the position of the person, or the population that you're working with, as critically important in supporting the success of vulnerable groups.

For participants, this meant constantly acquiring new information about student strengths, circumstances, and needs. And this, in turn, required an ability to adapt at collective and individual levels. According to Esthela:

> We need to think beyond academic success, we need to start where the student is, we need to be able to have a better handle on what are the other needs students have, and when I say needs, I'm also thinking that we need to have a better handle on what are the assets that students bring.

Much like adopting a both-and mentality, *empoderamiento* in the context of servingness meant being open to pivots and adjustments—sometimes for the collective and sometimes for individuals. Such adaptability was perceived as empowering, as it provided students with culturally responsive opportunities to succeed. As noted by Dustin:

> There are multiple dimensions [to servingness]. One is, "are we meeting the actual needs of our students" both from a personal situation standpoint and from a "are we doing the best we can in serving them in terms of helping them learn in what they need to learn?" The second dimension would be something like, "what role does the university play in the community, how do we help our community beyond simply our educational role?"

Faculty drew on the concept of servingness to advance institutional change considerate of the needs of students and the community. *Empoderamiento* was the basis of servingness practice and a strategy directed toward community-driven student success. The institution's location on the U.S.-Mexico border was deemed to provide perspective and opportunities for facilitating student success. In this sense, faculty perceptions and actions demonstrated a critical awareness of the differential needs of Latinx students within their institution.

Discussion: Widening the Pipeline vs. Changing the World

Interviews with 22 faculty at a fronterizx HSI, identified three themes regarding their perceptions and enactment of servingness: *compromiso*, *pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento*. Each theme was responsive to the ways participants saw themselves as contributing to the mission and purpose of their institution. While most participants expressed familiarity as to what it means to be an HSI and how it can be demonstrated through daily practice, most did not use or understand the language of servingness, nor did they use the word "servingness" in their responses. Their perceptions of servingness thereby indicated unfamiliarity with the theory but embodied resonance with the practice. Based on these themes, we infer that faculty at this fronterizx HSI perceived and enacted servingess in ways aligned with Stanton-Salazar's (2011) conceptualization of empowerment agents who go beyond simply widening pipelines and seek to foster real social change.

For example, participants described feeling a sense of *compromiso* to remain socially embedded, serve the local community, and prepare students to serve the communities they come from. They described a moral imperative related to cultivating a culture of belonging or *pertenencia* among students, and they sought to achieve this through the practice of individualization and *empoderamiento*. Participants personalized student support and remained responsive to changing student circumstances that impacted student success (e.g., border crossing, employment, transportation, food insecurity, familial obligations). As part of their role as faculty, participants led the assets development process and leveraged additional support by drawing out strengths and successes in students' shared racial and ethnic history. Accordingly, institutional empowerment for participants consisted of identifying and mobilizing existing, but often unrecognized, student assets to remain responsive to community needs. Faculty took on the role of tailoring provisions of institutional support with a critical awareness of the social and structural forces that affected the success of Latinx students (Ching, 2022; Gooden & Martin, 2014; Ruiz & Valverde, 2012). Such faculty perceptions and actions resonate well with Stanton-Salazar's (2011) notion of the empowerment agent, as they demonstrate a critical awareness of the differential needs of Latinx students within their institution. Each finding (*compromiso*, *pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento*) entailed a nuanced form of Latinx-serving consciousness (Villarreal, 2022), as developed from challenging traditional mindsets and appreciating the many assets that a fronterizx setting has to offer.

Consistent with prior conceptualizations of servingness (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019; Núñez et al., 2013, 2015), participants enacted servingness through a race-conscious lens and sought to facilitate spaces that were positive and affirming of the race, ethnicity, language, and cultural experiences of the students they served. They sought ways to identify, recognize, and enhance the cultural wealth and knowledge students bring to campus. Such strategies included fostering environments that welcomed Latinx students and their families on campus and providing opportunities for Latinx students to incorporate their language and cultural background within their academic preparation. *Compromiso*, *pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento*, in this interpretation, extend the concept of servingness so it is perceived as situated and dialogic. Much like what Estepp et al. (2017) describe regarding student priorities and desired pathways, *compromiso*, *pertenencia*, and *empoderamiento* help ensure that students identify their goals not just with those of the institution but also as rooted in a community with its own strengths, priorities, values, and needs. These ways of serving demonstrated faculty as empowerment agents who extended their institutional support roles into the realms of advocacy, acting to counter unequal structures and empower a historically underserved student population (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Within this fronterizx HSI, faculty participants viewed servingness as a mechanism by which to disembed themselves from the reproductive practices of the institutional status quo, which has historically mistreated and ill-served Latinx students in higher education. Participants demonstrated a willingness to go outside of the established norms of higher education practice to accommodate and empower Latinx students culturally, linguistically, and via the curriculum; that is, through what G. A. Garcia et al. (2019) label as structures for serving and validating experiences. Their servingness practice exhibited the intentionality necessary to meet students where they are, set high expectations for success, and tailor programs to students' needs. Further, faculty's conceptualizations of servingness, based on practice, advanced perspectives and enactments of Latinx student support, helped transform their institution to more aptly serve both the academic and non-academic outcomes of Latinx students, and worked more intentionally toward racial equity (G. A. Garcia, 2023). Not surprisingly, the institution has been awarded several recognitions as America's leading Hispanic-serving institution, helping lower-income students secure social mobility while minimizing the cost of attendance.

Implications for Research

HSIs are at the forefront of efforts to increase educational access and success for the nation's Latinx population. As more institutions are becoming HSIs, particularly historically White, highly selective, and R1 institutions, additional research is needed to understand how they not just merely enroll but, rather, truly serve Latinx students. Learning with and from faculty at HSIs is important for advancing the concept of servingness as a theory to actual practice (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019).

In this study, we propose that Stanton-Salazar's (2011) notion of the empowerment agent can be a useful interpretive tool for enacting servingness capable of transformative

social change. But HSIs are nuanced and different. Some serve fronterizx students, others serve urban Latinx students of different racial and geographic backgrounds, and others may serve primarily Puerto Rican or Cuban students. Additional research is needed to understand how faculty perspectives and implementations of servingness differ across institutions and contexts.

Similarly, additional research is needed to understand the extent to which HSIs are embedding Hispanic-servingness in the organizational culture of institutions. Faculty perspectives, in this regard, may be beneficial for understanding the application of the Hispanic-serving designation into institutional practices, policies, and structures. For example, faculty in this study viewed servingness as a concept that lacked definition/meaning for the greater university community. The concept was often attributed to percentages or descriptors related to the student population. Additionally, a number of participants equated servingess to service. Servingness, however, must be understood outside of traditional conceptions of service and more in terms of dispositions and actions—how faculty interpret and enact servingness, particularly within their specific contexts and in ways that are culturally responsive. The findings from this study reveal the meaning that faculty make of servingness, specifically of multidimensional concepts like formal structures and validating experiences within them. To gain a more nuanced perspective of the ways institutions interpret servingness, further research from faculty perspectives across HSIs is necessary.

Implications for Practice

Faculty in this study identified servingness broadly through their responses as a sense of or affinity for promoting Latinx student success. There was a real sense of pride in faculty identifying the university as a leading Hispanic-serving institution. Faculty in this study also recognized a generative aspect of servingness related to connection, job satisfaction, and other intrinsic rewards (i.e., *compromiso* and social change). Yet, because servingness is not easily defined or measured, even at an institution recognized for serving Latinx students, it can be treated as invisible labor or uncompensated work—expected but not rewarded or valued by the system. In this sense, it is important to note that within the context of this fronterizx HSI, to serve does not simply mean to go above and beyond. Instead, servingness is interpreted as a moral imperative—through curricular changes, listening to student needs, adapting traditional structures, cultural validation, and other actions—that yields intrinsic meaning that faculty value, and whose meaning cannot always be quantified.

For example, faculty in this study indicated that they were unsure whether other faculty across campus were engaging in the same behavior/activities. They viewed their approach to servingness as a solitary pursuit, their *compromiso* for social change. Thus, we propose that greater attention to the practice of servingness is necessary at the administrative level in order to transform the institutional culture to reward and value servingness, also in ways that are meaningful and valuable to faculty. In our context, we can leverage notions of *compromiso*, as well as notions of *pertenencia* and *empoderamiento*, by further asking our communities of faculty, students, and staff if

and how these concepts resonate with them, as well as what other concepts they perceive in institutional structures and cultures. Thus, HSIs must be intentional about developing internal social structures or networks for engaging in servingness work and identifying those that push the boundaries of institutional agent to empowerment agent. Highlighting such efforts and identifying those engaging in this work can help foster a positive institutional culture for servingness.

Without definition or recognition in institutional policies and systems, servingness work may not become part of the institutional culture and, thus, may be taken for granted. Foregrounding and acknowledging servingness work can encourage a shared, visible culture of servingness that is recognized across leadership, faculty, staff, and students. We contend with G. A. Garcia et al. (2019) that such a culture of servingness, interpreted differently based on situations and contexts, can help transform structures that affect the institution's ability to serve students (e.g., governance, leadership, curricular and co-curricular offerings, decision-making processes, incentive structures, training and development, assessment and evaluation, and community engagement).

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Note

1. We draw on the perspectives of Rodríguez (2017) and Salinas (2020) in our use of *Latinx* to acknowledge and refer to the lives, gender, histories, cultures, languages, and bodies of people from Latin American background and/or descent in the United States, regardless of their migratory status.

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