Journal of

Higher Education Policy

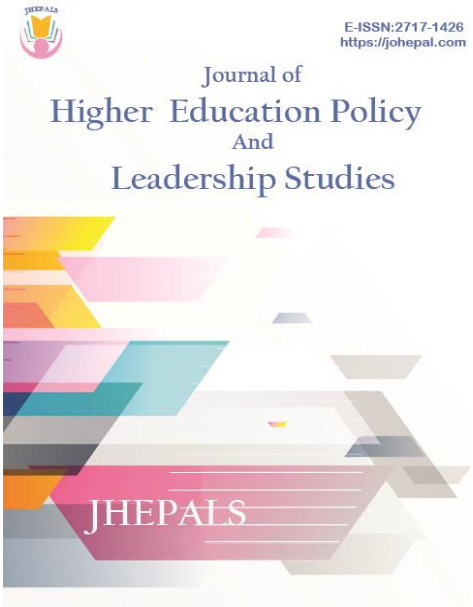
And

Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com

Who Benefits from Collegiate Leadership Education? The Importance of Amplifying Hispanic College Students' Leadership Experiences



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Article Received **2025/02/15**

Article Accepted **2025/05/01**

Published Online **2025/06/30**

Cite article as:

Gutiérrez, K. J., Willis, T., & Manning-Ouellette, A. (2025). Who benefits from collegiate leadership education? The importance of amplifying hispanic college students' leadership experiences. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *6*(2), 140-152.
https://dx.doi.org/10.61882/johepal.6.2.140

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[DOI: 10.61882/johepal.6.2.140]

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Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 6 Issue: 2
pp. 140-152
DOI:
10.61882/johepal.6.2.140

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Abstract

Leadership education plays a critical role in college student development, yet existing curricula often reflect Eurocentric theories that fail to account for the diverse lived experiences of Hispanic students. This paper examines the gaps in leadership education by exploring how Hispanic students develop their leadership identity and the barriers they face within existing programs. Drawing from research on leadership development, intersectionality, and cultural influences, we argue that leadership education must move beyond traditional models to embrace culturally inclusive frameworks that reflect Hispanic students' values, such as community engagement, relational leadership, and familismo. The underrepresentation of Hispanic students in leadership programming, along with systemic inequities in higher education, underscores the need for institutions to intentionally center Hispanic voices in leadership curricula. By integrating culturally responsive leadership education, colleges and universities can enhance Hispanic student success, foster inclusive leadership development, and contribute to more equitable institutional practices. This paper provides implications for higher education leaders, faculty, and administrators to implement leadership programs that recognize and uplift Hispanic students' unique perspectives and contributions.

Keywords: Leadership Education; Hispanic Students; Diversity; Familismo; Cultural Education

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[DOI: 10.61882/johepal.6.2.140]

Introduction

Leadership learning, development, and education continue to evolve as more and more research emerges. As Dugan (2011) points out, differentiating between the concepts of leadership practice, education, and development is a modern concept that addresses the complexity of leadership research. Leadership development refers to the ongoing process individuals and organizations go through to meet shared goals (Dugan, 2011). Leadership development is more complex than leadership education or training; its continuous nature makes it different and is a crucial part of the student development process in higher education. Part of the developing process of student leaders is setting them on a path to discover their leader identity and how they learn about the formation of this identity. Students develop their leader identity not only through classroom experiences and practical knowledge but also through their meaning-making process and their lived experiences (Orsini & Sunderman, 2024). Leadership curricula tends to be guided by theories developed by White and Euro-centric scholars and often taught by a White professors or professional staff (Irwin & Posselt, 2022), limiting marginalized voices in curricular and co-curricular programming. To the contrary, students develop their leadership identity through reflection of lived experiences (Noopila & Pichon, 2022), but institutions may not highlight minoritized voices through leadership curricula. We must ask, who truly benefits from leadership education and development curriculum? Are all students and their lived experiences considered in leadership programs at colleges and universities? Are leadership programs culturally inclusive? How is leadership education preparing Hispanic students for success post-graduation? This article will focus on the importance of including and elevating Hispanic voices in leadership education curricula, learning, and practice. As scholars, we recognize the diversity of terms used to refer to racially minoritized students of Latin American heritage and the impact of language in research. The terms Hispanic and Latine are often used interchangeably in literature; however, they point to different populations. Latine refers to people of Latin American descent, and Hispanic refers to people with heritage from Spanish-speaking countries (McCarty et al., 2024). Throughout this paper, we will use the term Hispanic rather than Latino, Latine, or Latinx as one of the authors personally identifies as Hispanic, and the term better aligns with her own identity and perspective.

Leadership Education and Diverse Voices

Leadership education, learning, and development of students in higher education can be a tool for higher education institutions to prepare their students to meet the needs of employers as they join the workforce. Leadership education and training is much more than a simple process, it is a journey that students embark, and it equips them with the tools that they need to become effective leaders. It is a developmental journey that empowers students to use what they learn and apply it to the real world (Kroll et al., 2024). Leadership education has proven to enhance students' soft skills, such as communication, social engagement, and critical thinking (Mumma, 2023; Soria et al., 2024). Leadership development is an investment that has the potential to reinforce the abilities and resourcefulness of the students, boosting their competitiveness when they join the workforce (Barrett et al., 2019). Yet, leadership development research has focused on

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dominant voices and perspectives, and there is limited literature regarding students of color and leadership curricula.

With leadership development at the forefront of student learning and development, leadership programming must consider students' intersection of social identities such as race, gender, and cultural background. Unfortunately, leadership education scholarship has scarcely challenged the dominant perspective and how power and privilege play a role in leadership education and development (Haber-Curran & Tapia-Fuselier, 2020; Noopila & Pichon, 2022). In today's higher education environment, scholars should be encouraged to dive into the nuances that diverse voices bring to the conversation and how students approach leadership based on their rich backgrounds, such as race, gender, and abilities.

Dominant voices often benefit from diverse programming, yet students of color and their lived experiences often serve as central educational tools for others (Hoffman et al., 2019; Noopila & Pichon, 2022). It is important to underscore that the responsibility to educate and enhance leadership outcomes should not solely fall on students of color and the lived experiences of students of color are not merely an educational tool for others to benefit. Creating cultural programs and spaces for students of color while maintaining White normative constructs does not translate to racially inclusive campuses, on the contrary, it maintains the status quo of Whiteness on college campuses (Cabrera et al., 2016). Whiteness refers to the racial ideology that justifies the dominance of one race over others (Foste, 2020). It is important to know that there is a difference between Whiteness and White people. White people simply refers to a social identity based on someone’s skin color (Cabrera et al., 2016; Foste, 2020). Creating diversity or cultural programming is not the same as centering the needs of the students they are supposed to serve. Instead, these programs maintain the invisibility of Whiteness and color blindness that White people benefit from (Foste, 2020).

Creating culturally aware leadership education programs for students should not translate to Hispanic students' acculturation into hemogenic norms. It should develop them as leaders based on their own meaning-making process. Bicultural students often need to code-switch back and forth between their cultures, and it can be an exhausting process. Switching usually happens depending on the environment around them (McCarty et al., 2024). Considering this kind of behavior when developing an inclusive leadership curriculum can facilitate the student's involvement and authentic immersion in the program.

A Case for Centering Hispanic Students in Leadership Development

Hispanic student populations continue to grow in higher education institutions, yet they continue to be underrepresented in completion rates (Knox, 2024; McCarty et al., 2024; Phillips et al., 2023). At the same time, institutions are facing an enrollment decline that will gradually decline in the foreseeable future and are concerned about their total enrollment numbers. Yet, not many of their resources are allocated toward long-term initiatives to increase enrollment and graduation rates, and the student body's diversification is not always considered when strategies are implemented (Petty et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2023). Curricular and co-curricular leadership education programs have been shown to enhance the student experience and promote student success in higher education settings (Barrett et al., 2019; Mumma, 2023; Soria et al., 2024). With this knowledge, focusing on Hispanic

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students' leadership development and learning seems to be a way to improve graduation rates, which creates expanded opportunities for colleges and universities and the Hispanic population at large.

In the case of Hispanic students, leadership literature focuses on leadership practice through student involvement, not on the development or learning of leadership curricula. An important distinction between Hispanic students and the rest of the college student population when it comes to leadership is how they understand it (Acosta & Guthrie, 2021; Torres, 2018). The limited research focusing on Hispanic students' leadership development, learning, identity, and involvement suggests that these students understand leadership from a community perspective and prioritize inclusion, relationships, and empowerment. (Haber-Curran & Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). Communities of color often understand leadership from a collective perspective, or as Bordas (2016) explains it, a We culture and perspective. It is also important to note that Hispanic students often reject the term' leader' and opt for more community-involving terms such as 'role model' or 'mentor' (Haber-Curran & Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). Leadership programs can meet students where they are by including language with which a student population outside the dominant race can identify. Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are ideally placed at the center of the population to lead innovative leadership education practices and research that universities can then implement widely (Guardia & Evans, 2008).

In a study of 46 HSIs, Noopila and Pichon (2022) found that leadership programs lack a foundation on social justice, ethics, and community engagement, all skills that resonate with the Hispanic student population. Another issue that students face regarding leadership education is the availability of programs. Radiant Forest, LLC (2020) produced a report that shows that by 2018, only 15% of post-secondary education institutions offer leadership education programs via certificates or degrees. Many leadership programs are designed for graduate students, such as Masters or Doctoral level degrees, leaving undergraduate students behind (Noopila & Pichon, 2022). Moreover, many programs offer skills for early career individuals or seasoned professionals but not for students looking to start their careers.

Foundations of Leadership Education

Leadership development allows students to gain skills not always learned in a typical classroom setting, especially post-COVID-19 pandemic, as students have opted for a more hybrid student experience (Mumma, 2023). Leadership educators more commonly use three leadership theories authored mainly by White researchers. Irwin & Posselt (2022) found that the three most common theories among leadership educators are the social change model (Komives & Wagner, 2009), the leadership challenge (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), and the relational leadership model (Komives et al., 2013). They also found that White personnel staff most leadership institutes or programs and facilitate leadership education for all students. The issue is that with the practitioners and the researchers having a dominant race social perspective, the voices of students of color are silenced in the leadership development processes.

Existing scholarship on leadership focuses on widely represented individuals and organizations, which results in less than equitable practices and outcomes for students of

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color in leadership education programs (Johnson & Soria, 2020; Noopila & Pichon, 2022). Leadership education is an essential piece in the development and learning of college students. Leadership education can also be a way for college students to develop crucial skills such as communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and adaptability. A study by Cansoy (2017) showed that leadership education programs significantly improve these skills for college students. This skill development can substantially impact a college student's preparedness for entering the workforce. Going through a leadership education experience can be a way for students to network and make connections, which can then influence their ability to get work post-graduation. It also exposes them to opportunities they might not have had access to otherwise.

Along with skill development, leadership education and learning can be a way for students to develop their own identities and gain more self-awareness. As a fluid and multidimensional construct, identity continuously develops over time. A student's leadership identity is their evolving understanding of themselves as leaders and how they embody leadership in practice (Guthrie & Torres, 2021). Some leadership education curricula have implemented areas of self-reflection to help promote leadership identity growth (Clapp-Smith et al., 2019). Students who engage in leadership education often undergo a purposeful maturation process, fostering both personal and professional growth. Finally, leadership education and experiences have allowed students to work with and navigate diverse perspectives. Student leaders described having a greater appreciation of the diversity around them after going through leadership experiences (Meer et al., 2019). This is incredibly important as educators work on making leadership education and learning more equitable; having students who have gone through leadership education understand the value of diversity can help promote more equitable leadership education opportunities.

Leadership Curriculum and Hispanic Students

A question often posed around leadership discussions is, are leaders born or made? The answer continues to be a discussion among scholars, but we do not frequently question whether anyone can be a leader. The typical answer to this question is yes. What individuals do not consider are the systems of oppression that do not always allow students to develop as leaders. Dugan (2011) critiques three myths about leadership development often found in leadership literature: (1) leadership development is simple; (2) leadership capacity is a function of training and experience; and (3) everyone can be a leader. The idea that everyone can be a leader is rooted in a privileged lens. As Dugan (2011) asserts, "everyone can be a leader may indeed be accurate for a narrow segment of the public for whom social oppression is not an issue" (p. 82).

What does all of this mean for Hispanic college students? Leadership development and learning in higher education must consider student identities and intersectionality. Leadership education must incorporate cultural awareness frameworks and allow students to grow into leaders through culturally relevant experiences that embody their identities, not despite their identities (Haber-Curran & Tapia-Fuselier, 2020). These programs must consider the systemic barriers students face on their day to day and how different dominant structures interact to influence their development. Leadership models currently used by higher education professionals tend to benefit students with dominant identities

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disproportionally, and they fail even to acknowledge the presence of race and racism in higher education (Irwin & Posselt, 2022). Suppose tools to develop future leaders only acknowledge dominant identities. In that case, the result will continue to be institutions with 'diverse' leadership development programs that are not culturally aware enough to equally benefit all student groups. As Hispanic college enrollment increases, institutions must equip themselves and commit to preparing these students for success after graduation. Keeping students connected to their roots is vital for their development, learning, and future success (Rendón et al., 2016; Tierney, 2016). Developing curricular and co-curricular programs that take into account how Hispanic students develop their leader identity and how they learn leadership can improve outcomes for this student group. This, in turn contributes to the success of institutions of higher education.

Greek Life, Hispanic Students, and Leadership Development

Historically, researchers have explored leadership within higher education by studying one traditional version of leadership: Greek Life (Atkinson, 2010; Hevel et al., 2014; Lawhead, 2013; Selznick et al., 2024). One of the reasons why scholars explore Greek Life leadership as part of leadership development research is due to the structure of the leadership roles in Greek Life. The connections that students make as they participate in Greek Life and by taking leadership roles while in it and the support they receive in their fraternities and sororities positively influence their leadership identity development (Lawhead, 2013). Understanding that Greek Life leadership can influence both leadership and personal growth, it is essential to explore how Greek Life can affect the development of Hispanic students.

Much of the leadership work regarding Hispanic students focuses on their leadership development through Greek Life participation or other ways of campus involvement (Garcia et al., 2017; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013). Participating in Greek Life and other leadership roles has influenced the ethnic identity development in both male and female Hispanic students (Guardia & Evans, 2008; Onorato, 2010). Joining a fraternity is shown to be a predictor of leadership development in Hispanic students. There was no particular difference in the Greek fraternity joined; all seemed to impact Hispanic students' ability to understand themselves better, create spaces of group engagement, and provide different perspectives of what leadership looks like through different contexts (Garcia et al., 2017). Although Hispanic students face challenges navigating fraternities and sororities that position leadership development through contemporary norms, their involvement in Greek life benefits the development of their leadership identity (Lugo, 2020).

While Greek life can have benefits for Hispanic students' leadership identity development, the context of the Greek life organization is important. Hispanic students at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) who participated in an ethnic centered Greek life organization, which was created with Hispanic students in mind, were able to feel a greater sense of community support and even identity validation (Guardia & Evans, 2008). Hispanic students who participated in non-ethnic-centered Greek life organizations, which have been historically created with White students in mind, experienced did experience benefits related to peer connection. Hispanic students who participate in more traditional White centered fraternities at PWIs, face pressure to assimilate to the dominant white culture,

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encounter barriers to personal cultural expression, and even feel a lack of support (Joyce, 2018). Context matters within the benefits of the involvement of Hispanic students in Greek Life, and the Greek Organization's history can impact these experiences.

Greek life can be a powerful way for Hispanic students to develop leadership skills and qualities through engagement, observation, and participation. However, it has the limitation of focusing on the male Hispanic student perspective. Much of the research on Hispanic students and Greek Life centers around male students, leaving behind the voices of Hispanic females, no-gender conforming, and LGBTQ+ students. These voices are crucial to understanding Hispanic college students' leadership and leader identity development processes, as gender roles are culturally relevant for this population (Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2012). With this in mind, it is crucial to explore the differences in gender roles and leadership among Hispanic college students.

Gender Roles and Its Influence on Leadership Perspectives in Hispanic Students

Culture and ethnicity influence how we view, understand, and participate in leadership activities. Much of what we see as youth can influence how we expect leadership in our day-to-day activities as adults. Being mindful of cultural influences' role in leadership can help us better understand the why behind leadership decisions. When exploring Hispanic students' views on leadership, Haber (2012) found that Hispanic students tended to view leadership as more community-oriented than task-oriented. Within the Hispanic college student community, it is crucial to partially frame the conversation around how gender roles affect their leadership styles and development.

Cultural norms influence how Hispanic students view and practice leadership. Family and community are significant influences in Hispanic culture, and this can be seen in their leadership style, as Hispanic student leaders often focus more on relationship and community building when discussing leadership (Haber, 2012). Torres et al. (2003) tied some leadership identity development in male versus female Hispanic students to the cultural context in which they grew up. They further explore the beliefs of Hispanic communities and gender roles and how students are brought up to view men as dominant and the ones who have control.

In contrast, Hispanic women play a humble and supportive role in society. These cultural norms influence how male and female Hispanic students go through personal leadership development (Salazar Montoya & Kew, 2023). Representation and role models matter specifically for female Hispanic students. Hispanic female faculty have commonly been underrepresented, and not seeing female Hispanic faculty can influence the college experience for these students (Murakami & Núñez, 2014). To best prepare Hispanic students for leadership roles, it is essential to be mindful of the cultural differences between male and female Hispanic students, and there is a need for a better understanding of how best to create a leadership curriculum for Hispanic students that is inclusive of these gender norms.

Implications for Practice

Improving the odds of success for Hispanic college students benefits all students, the Hispanic student population, and the higher education community. Implementing culturally relevant leadership education programs has a clear potential to improve the experience of

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students of color and their academic success. Leadership education is not only a research topic, but also part of the day-to-day operation for many institutions today, whether through academic or co-curricular programming. Colleges and universities must focus on the success of all students and not just the dominant population. Higher education institutions can empower students, particularly those who feel vulnerable in society. Petty et al. (2023) asserts this critical consideration, "colleges must become more student-focused in their practices; if not, education will not be the great equalizer we all expect" (p. 145). Institutions should center the diversification of the current student population as they update and develop policies, programs, and practices to be able to provide a true equal opportunity for all.

Hispanic students bring a unique set of lived experiences that must be considered when serving them. Latinidad and familismo must be at the center of universities' decision-making process for decisions that can potentially affect Hispanic students. Latinidad is the concept of unity among the Latino population, the construct of a branch of society where people from different Latin American nationalities come together and become one regardless of identities and conflicts (Lawrence & Clemons, 2023). In other words, irrespective of where Latin American people are from, they will unite as Latinos and work together for the betterment of their community at large. On the other hand, familismo is the belief in "maintaining strong family ties, the expectation that family is the primary source of support, an emphasis on loyalty to family" (Kiyama et al., 2015). Hispanic students' decision-making and identity development are strongly tied to family. For Hispanics, family refers to the support system surrounding them; not only blood family, neighbors, and friends are part of their understanding of family. When these lived experiences are considered, researchers and practitioners have the power to disrupt the systems that act as barriers to Hispanic students' success and educational attainment by uplifting them and helping them become good leaders in society.

By teaching leadership learning, skills development and removing barriers for Hispanic students, higher education institutions have the power to change the current anti-immigrant rhetoric by embracing students' unique backgrounds. Hispanic students are in a place of anxiety and vulnerability as we continue to see anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) bans and mass deportation initiatives, as well as the reversal of affirmative action (McCarty et al., 2024). Hispanic students have expressed feelings of discouragement and uncertainty about their future and are anxious and fearful for their and their loved one's well-being (McCarty et al., 2024). Implementing and promoting culturally inclusive narratives in leadership education can propel institutions forward by showing students that they belong and that their stories matter. A culturally inclusive curriculum can send a strong message of support for our Hispanic students, empowering them to pursue their dreams and contribute to our economy and society as the global citizens that they are.

Discussion and Conclusion

Leadership development and learning is a dynamic and evolving discipline that significantly impacts students' personal, professional, and academic growth. This article underscores the importance of culturally inclusive leadership education, particularly as institutions strive to support an increasingly diverse student population, including Hispanic students. While

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leadership education and development programs have demonstrated their potential to foster critical skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability, they must address systemic inequities that hinder equitable access and student learning outcomes.

Hispanic students, now the largest racially minoritized group in higher education, bring unique cultural perspectives and lived experiences that educators must consider in leadership development. Latinidad and familismo are at the core of Hispanic students' identities; however, existing leadership curricula often fail to incorporate these perspectives, relying instead on frameworks and practices designed for dominant identity groups. For Hispanic students, culturally aware leadership education that embraces their identities and intersectionality is crucial. Programs must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and adopt practices that acknowledge the importance of race, ethnicity, gender, and cultural background in shaping leadership identity.

As institutions navigate declining enrollment and seek to recruit and retain a diverse student body, leadership development and learning becomes an even more critical component of student success. By investing in culturally inclusive leadership programs and addressing systemic inequities, colleges and universities can empower Hispanic students to excel academically and professionally. Culturally inclusive leadership education equips students to become global citizens with a strong civic engagement foundation. Hispanic students understand leadership as a community-centered activity, which is a critical component to healing and driving a better world for all. Leadership education can help build the appropriate tools to give back to their respective communities. Future research must continue to explore innovative approaches to leadership education and learning, ensuring that it reflects the diverse realities and voices of today's student population and prepares them to lead in an increasingly complex world.

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[DOI: 10.61882/johepal.6.2.140]

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Human Participants

This research did not involve human participants.

Originality Note

This manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. All authors have approved the manuscript and agree with its submission to the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The authors claimed that Grammarly is used in this research just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the author(s) to write different parts of the research. One native speaker of English is also invited to proof-read the text prior to its online publication.

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