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Answering the Call: Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Leaders in the Quest for Access, Excellence, and Equity in American Higher Education

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**The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley:  
Reframing HSIs through a Multi-Sited Ethnography**

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**Abstract**

This article contributes to the study of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) through a narrative grounded on two points of innovation. It offers frameworks to decenter the conversation on HSIs from normative practices in higher education to focus on pedagogical, cultural, and political relational processes that find greater congruence between nominal HSIs and the Latina/o<sup>1</sup> students, families, and the communities that populate those universities. It looks at points of innovation that emerged in two different parts of the country at different places, spaces, and time. One was initiated at the University of North Florida (UNF) in the early-to-mid-1970s, and the second is taking place at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in South Texas (UTRGV). The UNF experience placed race relations front and center of its innovation, and offers an appropriate historical lens through which to understand the social and

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<sup>1</sup> This article uses several terms depending on context. Hispanic and Latino are pan-ethnic terms used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau to classify a diverse population with origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic (and other parts of the Caribbean), Central America, South America, and Spain. The Latina/o population in the United States currently stands at 55 million. The Mexican-origin population includes Mexican nationals, U.S.-born citizens, naturalized citizens, undocumented immigrants, and the children of recent immigrants. Mexican American and Hispanic is used to be consistent with historical context or literature on Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Chicana/o is used in historical context for Mexican Americans who call themselves Chicanas/os. Ennis, S. R., Rios-Vargas, M., & Albert, N. G. (2011). *The Hispanic population: 2010: 2010 census briefs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic and Statistics Administrations, U.S. Census Bureau.

institutional change taking place in South Texas.<sup>2</sup> The UTRGV work provides an example of how an HSI can align its curricular and core identity to reflect the population and region it serves. This study employs a methodology and theoretical framework that aligns the inquiry, pedagogy, and meaning-making process in a generative and relational discourse.

### **Introduction**

This article contributes to the discourse on the role of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) by escorting the conversation into the uncomfortable place of situating race, culture, and language at the center of analysis and institution-building. The authors view race as a socio-cultural, political, and legal construct (Haney López, 1996; Omi & Winant; 2014; Wexler, 2010), and institution-building as a response to race, culture, language, and identity (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017; Guajardo, Guajardo, Militello, & Janson, 2016; Kranz, Steele, & Lund, 2005). This work expands the conversation surrounding HSIs by focusing on race, agency, and historical consciousness through a comparative analysis. This examination juxtaposes The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's (UTRGV) purpose to become a bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate university with a specific racial project (Omie & Winant 2014) instituted at the University of North Florida (UNF). The analysis underscores the importance of how race plays out in the fabric of American society and culture and its impact on higher education. The UNF project provides a lens through which to examine leadership in institution-building and contributes to the study of HSIs by pushing the discourse toward new analytical and epistemological terrain.

This article further contributes to the study of HSIs by providing a theoretical framework that informs this analysis and expanded conversation. This framework draws from historical racial projects, identifies cultural fronts as points of tension and innovations, and encourages a dynamic critical pedagogy that privileges the student, faculty, and community as creators of knowledge and power. It adds another dimension to the growing body of literature by breaking the normative approach to the study of HSIs, which is necessary for developing hybrid responses to difficult and persistent questions. The authors believe that complex

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<sup>2</sup> This article uses Black and White because the name of class at the University of North Florida was titled "Conflict in Black and White." It uses White for consistency with the terminology of the U.S. Census Bureau. It uses African American when used in context of the research literature.

methods and strategies are required to learn more deeply about historical issues that have persisted in education, including access, quality, and innovation related to climate, curriculum, and knowledge.

The article explores historical and contemporary understandings of race through curriculum and institution-building projects. One such project, the Venture Studies program, took shape at the University of North Florida (UNF) at the point of its inception and was supported by its founding president. The other project currently is unfolding at UTRGV as the institution seeks to implement the university's guiding principles to promote bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy throughout its curricular programs. The project at UNF addressed racial tensions between White and Black Americans reflected in the demographic realities of place, space, and time. The critical discourse on HSIs is significantly aided by looking at pertinent, examples of projects that place race and culture front and center of its new curriculum such as that instituted at UNF.

The project at UTRGV focuses on a more complex dialectic on race and racial tensions, as Mexican Americans have historically been viewed as "Caucasian," even as they have been treated as a racialized group (Anzaldúa, 1987; Blanton, 2004; Gómez, 2007; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; Menchaca, 2001; Molina, 2014; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987).<sup>3</sup> The history of Mexican Americans is characterized by policies and practices that relegated this population to second-class citizenship as a non-White racial group (Menchaca, 2001; Gómez, 2007). The historiography chronicles the cultural front that led to the historical racialization of Mexican-origin people that resulted in their social, economic, and political exclusion. Scholars trace the process of subordination to the industrialization of the Southwest that began after the U.S.-Mexico war ended in 1848 (Acuña, 1988; Barrera, 1979; Griswold del Castillo, 1990; Gómez, 2007). Like African Americans in the deep South and elsewhere, Mexican Americans experienced residential, school, and social segregation, labor segmentation, and political disenfranchisement throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

UNF developed as an institution at a cultural front and point of innovation that grappled

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<sup>3</sup> After the U.S.-Mexico War ended in 1848, Mexicans in the acquired territories, which numbered about 100,000-110,000 were granted citizenship in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. During this period, citizenship was conferred only to white male land owners and only whites could be naturalized, thus under the Treaty, Mexicans citizenship status was equated with being white.

with the contentious racial tensions that plagued Black-White relations rooted in race relations of the American South. UTRGV stands at its own point of innovation, as it seeks to reconcile issues of race, culture, language, and identity through its institution-building efforts. The authors' roles in participating in the birth and growth of the comparative institutions provide unique perspectives of the development of innovative curricular programming. As faculty members and administrators, the authors are engaged in the response to institutional and regional racial, ethnic, and cultural realities within their respective disciplines.

### **Context & Institution-Building**

UNF and UTRGV have distinct histories and were chosen as case studies for analysis because both universities exercised institutional risk-taking during times of social and political contention. UNF's innovation took place while the South continued to grapple with the realities of *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* (Coleman, Kelly & Moore, 1975). UNF's Venture Studies program tackled the issue of racial tension that plagued Black and White relations through a bold innovative course called "Conflict in Black and White." UTRGV was born by legislative mandate in 2013 and opened its doors in the fall of 2015 in response to a socio-political and human capital readiness for greater regional investment in higher education. The university's innovation is marked by the advent of a B3 Institute (Bilingual, Bicultural, Biliterate—English and Spanish) to expand and promote existing coursework and curricula that can be delivered in Spanish or bilingually and through culturally relevant pedagogies. This innovation comes during a time of heightened racial tensions where border walls and deportations shape the social and political discourse, especially in the Rio Grande Valley. Both universities played, and continue to play, significant roles in shaping their respective socio-cultural and economic regional environments. Similarities exist between the curricular innovations each institution developed to address critical community issues stemming from race relations. UNF created an innovative Venture Studies program that explored race relations at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Along the border, UTRGV is transforming itself as a bilingual and bicultural institution through innovative curricular, pedagogical, research and service initiatives at the height of contentious immigration debates. These two examples highlight points of innovation amidst points of tension at different historical times and places.

Located in Jacksonville, Florida, UNF was nestled in a cultural and political environment

that mirrored the values and practices deeply embedded in the American south. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jacksonville was marked by segregation in schools, housing, and discrimination in the job market. The Ax Handle incident precipitated by boycotts led by Black youth in the early 1960s highlighted the racial angst in the community (Hurst, 2008). In 1970, Jacksonville's total population was 528, 865 with Whites comprising 407,695 and Blacks 118,158. Whites made up 77.7% of the population and Blacks were 22.3%.<sup>4</sup>

The founding president of UNF was hired in the late 1960s to build the infrastructure for new upper-division and graduate programs. UNF would be launched with approximately 500 students and would grow to 5,000 during its first decade. The student body was largely white, but saw an increasing enrollment of Black students. Building a new university combined with the socio-cultural and political milieu of the day formed a backdrop primed for creativity and innovation through curricula and programming. One such innovation supported by the UNF's founding president included a bold experiment that would bring students and community members from different racial backgrounds together through a program called Venture Studies. Shortly after the university opened its doors to students in the fall of 1972, a class called "Human Conflict in Black and White" was developed and taught in the Psychology Department. The class responded to the institutional impulse for innovation as part of Venture Studies. It also responded to the need for students to have access to a curriculum that fostered a deeper understanding of the historical racial tension and conflict between White and Black Americans rooted in U.S. race relations. "Human Conflict in Black and White" would provide a transformative educational experience for who enrolled in this course and would become a celebrated example of the possibilities for higher education to delve into the challenging societal issue of race (Kranz et al., 2005; Kranz, Ramirez, Steele, & Lund, 2006).

The discourse on race in the 1970s drew almost exclusively from the history of race relations between Whites and Blacks in the United States. The White/Black binary was a well-established historical narrative in the 1970s, and it continues to dominate the terms for discussions on race well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The demographic shifts in the United States that occurred between the 1970s and the new millennium due to increased migration from areas south of the border caused a dramatic flux in the definition of race and the meaning of ethnicity

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau General Characteristics of the Population: 1970. Retrieved from [www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/106/508.php](http://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/106/508.php).

and culture. The new demography of the nation requires a redefinition and expanded discourse of this historical framework. The ebb and flow of race relations in American history provides the context for the creation of both universities. While UNF was born during the Civil Rights Movement, UTRGV was recently created amidst a different socio-cultural and political environment. A different brand of activism defined by institution-building has gripped this region of the borderlands. The founding of UTRGV is the most prominent example of this change that includes a new medical school and new state-of-the-art academic facilities. A guiding principle of the new university calls for building an HSI that reflects the cultural and linguistic heritage of its surrounding community. Given its location, UTRGV is poised to reshape the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of the region as it seeks to integrate bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy through curricular and programmatic innovations. UTRGV is leading efforts to create official bilingual zones, dual language programs in local public schools, and stronger connections between the university and families, community organizations and other stakeholders.

This article employs a multi-sited ethnographic methodology. It looks at a racial project at UNF in the early 1970s that encouraged the creation of cutting-edge courses. And it examines an institution-building initiative at UTRGV that is building bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy into its curricula through innovative pedagogy and programming. In studying the two cases, it looks at nuanced racial, cultural, and linguistic spaces through the cultural fronts analytical framework that informs the learning across races and cultural groups. The two sites engage in projects that address racial issues which we use as units of analysis to inform this research and imagine new discourses, practices, and policies for future HSI work. Pedagogical practices include building positive relationships, creating community-engagement projects, learning in a bi-directional manner, debriefing conversations, and reflecting on lived experiences. It also includes the art of creating new knowledge and privileging latent community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) embedded in communities of color that are oftentimes not acknowledged or legitimized by formal institutions. We explore the nuanced spaces created by these projects while maintaining the authenticity of the lived experiences. What follows is a snapshot of the lessons learned from the past and how they can be applied to and inform the development of curricula, pedagogical practices, and a new brand of HSIs.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this work is to augment the study of HSIs by providing a better understanding of how these institutions can move toward curricula, instruction, research, and service that reflect and respond to the populations they serve. It achieves this by analyzing the innovative work of two distinct universities with different populations in two contexts. The article does not intend to engage in an analysis of the entire deep South, but we find that the educational, cultural, and political lessons of the Ventures Studies program in north Florida can inform the racial, political, and pedagogical encounters experienced along the U.S.-Mexico border at a different geopolitical context and time. While the demography of each site is different, the conflict created by the encounters of multiple worlds of values, practices, culture, politics, and identities are similar and transferable. This article chronicles the experiences and theories used to make sense of the lived experiences and it places this work in conversation within HSI literature. The authors intentionally de-center the conversation from the HSI by moving it beyond the norm of university learning. The theoretical framework draws from historical racial projects, identifies cultural fronts as points of tension and innovations, and provides a dynamic critical pedagogy that privileges the student, faculty, and community as creators of knowledge and power.

In the following sections, we outline the historical background of HSIs and the methodology of the article. We also describe a racial theory in practice, and examine lived experiences as observables by delving into micro ethnographies situated in north Florida and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. A discussion of the lessons learned and recommendations concludes the document. These are accompanied by a discussion of challenges, possibilities, and opportunities related to transforming higher education environments that respond to the historical, cultural, and racial realities of students. This article highlights a theoretical framework that broadens the meaning of access in higher education beyond the brick and mortar of the university to provide educational equity. It offers a framework that allows faculty, administrators, and students to make meaning of issues of race, ethnicity, and class in different cultural contexts, places, and time. This expanded meaning of access focuses on giving Latina/o students enhanced contact with ideas, conceptual knowledge, and the intellectual tools to enable them to challenge historical boundaries and move beyond the “borders” of regional, cultural, and economic isolation.

### **Historical Background of HSIs**

The term Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) as an official designation was formalized in 1992 when Congress reauthorized the 1965 Higher Education Act (HEA) under Title III, and again in 1998 under Title V. Under this legislation HSIs are defined as "...accredited and degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent student enrollment" (Laden, 2001, 2004; Santiago, 2006, p. 3). Inspired by the opportunities gained by Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) stemming from the HBCU designation under the 1965 HEA, the notion of a "Hispanic Institution," gained traction during the early 1980s (Laden, 1999 & 2001; Nevárez, M., personal communication, August 20, 2016). Leaders in Texas, New Mexico, Illinois, and Puerto Rico recognized that Latina/o students who were concentrated in colleges and universities with limited resources represented "a definable group in higher education" that faced unique challenges in completing college degrees (Santiago, 2006, p. 6). In 1986, leaders from New Mexico and Texas created the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) and decided that a university or college with a Hispanic student population of 25% was a sufficient critical mass for the HSI designation (Santiago, 2006; Nevárez, M., personal communication, August 20, 2016; Avila & Pankake, 2016).

In 1987 the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and other advocacy organizations filed a class-action lawsuit against the State of Texas, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and several state universities with the assistance from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). In *LULAC et al. v. Ann Richards et al.*, MALDEF lawyers argued that Mexican Americans in South Texas and other areas along the U.S.-Mexico border were denied equitable access to the state's flagship university systems. They were also denied access to comprehensive graduate and doctoral programs, professional schools, and state funding for institutions of higher education in the region. MALDEF also argued the state's method of distributing funds for higher education discriminated against students and schools along the border. In response to the lawsuit, in 1989 the Texas State Legislature created the South Texas Border Initiative to increase funding to nine border universities and brought the University of Texas-Pan American and University of Texas at Brownsville under the University of Texas System (Flack, 2003). In 1992, a District State Court ruled in favor of LULAC, finding the state's funding system for higher education unconstitutional

(Muñoz, 1991; Santiago, 2006). The following year, the Texas Supreme Court overturned the District Court's favorable ruling in *LULAC v Richards*. Despite this loss, the reauthorization of the HEA and creation of an official HSI designation under Title III signaled a positive move "to improve and expand the capacity of Hispanic-Serving Institutions to serve Latina/o and other low-income students" via federal funding (Santiago, 2006, p. 7).<sup>5</sup> Since then, HSIs have significantly increased access to higher education for Latina/o students nationwide.<sup>6</sup>

Although UTRGV's legacy institutions were predominantly White in enrollment in their early years, they became de facto HSI's by the 1980s due to the demographic shifts in the region (Avila & Pankake, 2016; Cortez, 2011). This demographic shift was captured by one UTPA administrator who stated, "We have always been an HSI and there needs to be a different designation for us who are doing it with greater numbers" (Cortez, 2011, p. 162).<sup>7</sup> Although the university did not gain official HSI status until after 1992, some faculty, staff, and administrators already perceived it as a "Hispanic Institution" (Avila & Pankake, 2016; Cortez,

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<sup>5</sup> In 1995 Congress approved the first appropriation of \$12 million for these schools. In 1998, Congressman Rubén Hinojosa (D-TX) pushed to create Title V for HSIs to distinguish them from HBCUs and TCUs and designate specific HSI funding (Flack, 2003; Santiago, 2006). HSIs became part of a larger coalition of colleges and universities designated as Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) to serve underrepresented students including African American, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic/Latino students. These institutions, which number about 1,200, have played crucial roles in granting access to higher education for minority students (Flores & Park, 2015). HSIs are distinguished from HBCUs in their history and mission in that HBCUs were created as early as the 1830s for the specific purpose of educating African Americans and have a longer tradition of providing access to higher education whereas HSIs grew out of predominantly-White institutions located in proximity to large Latino communities that became HSIs solely due to the increased enrollment of Latina/o or Mexican-origin populations (Benítez & DeAro, 2004; Flores & Park, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Title V funds are awarded on a competitive basis to officially designated HSIs for capacity-building, expansion of educational programs and to improve access to higher education for Hispanic students. U.S. Congress, 20 U.S. Code Part A 20 U.S. Code Subchapter V-Developing Institutions-Hispanic-Serving Institutions, §1101-Findings; purpose; and program authority, authorization of programs under the Higher Education Act of 1965, 1998. Title V grants can also be used for professional and curriculum development, academic instruction, faculty fellowships, library materials, and student service programs designed to improve academic success.

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1101>. Since 1995 the number of HSIs has grown from 189 to 435 with a little over half receiving Title V funds. Between 1995 and 2014, federal funding went from \$12 million to \$99 million, enabling HSI's to increase access to higher education for Latina/o students. By 2014, HSIs enrolled 60% of all Latino students, which increased the percentage of Latina/o adults who earned an Associate's from 12 to 23% and the percentage who earned a Bachelor's degree from 9 to 15 percent. Santiago, D., Taylor, M., Calderón & Galdeano, E. *From Capacity to Success: HSIs, Title V, and Latino Students* (Washington, DC: Excelencia in Education), 4-14; HACU Title V Grant Awards 2004-2015 [http://www.hacu.net/images/hacu/OPAI/2016\\_CF\\_Docs/6a](http://www.hacu.net/images/hacu/OPAI/2016_CF_Docs/6a) accessed May 18, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> This demographic trend in the RGV, state and nation continued into the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Current census figures number the Hispanic/Latino population at 55 million, comprising approximately 17% of the nation's total population. Sixty-four percent of this population is Mexican-origin. Texas is home to 10.8 million Hispanics/Latinos, comprising 39% of the state's total population. [www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/48,00](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/48,00)

2011; Nevárez, M., personal communication, August 20, 2016). The continued growth of the Mexican-origin population in the region is currently reflected in UTRGV's predominant Mexican-origin student population (90%), making it one of the highest Latina/o percentage HSIs (Santiago, 2008; *Excelencia in Education*, 2016a).<sup>8</sup>

Because of this demographic reality, recent studies of HSIs call for a new mission to provide Latina/o students with an equitable education that acknowledges and nurtures their cultural and linguistic wealth to promote academic success and college-completion rates (de los Santos & Cuamea, 2010; Greene et al., 2012; Lara & Lara, 2012; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). Given persistently low graduation rates, location, and demographics, UTRGV looks to other models of student success geared toward Latina/o students (Contreras & Contreras 2015; Núñez, Ramalho, & Cuero, 2010). As a new HSI, UTRGV has a rare opportunity to create a “more intentional” “Latina/o-enhancing” university that serves students by providing curricula that are culturally relevant, inclusive, and transformative—curricula that focus on Latina/o students' lived experiences, knowledge, and cultural wealth (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Cuellar, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Greene et al., 2012; Lara & Lara, 2012; Núñez et al., 2010; Yosso, 2005). UTRGV also has a unique opportunity to “develop a culture that is relevant to Latina/o students” and become “Latina/o-enhancing,” “meaning that students not only see themselves in the institutional practice, but develop a deeper sense of self along the way” (Corral, Gasman, Nguyen, & Samayoa, 2015; Garcia, n.d.). This paradigm shift compels the university to institutionalize a mission that is historically and epistemologically congruent with the realities of Latina/o students and their communities (Arciñiega, 2012; Brown, Santiago, & López, 2003; Kranz & Lund, 1998; Santiago, 2009).

### **Method and Theoretical Framework**

Research shows that college choice among Latina/o students is based upon proximity to family, cost of higher education (Brown et al., 2003; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Flores & Park, 2015; Nuñez & Bowers, 2011), and the reality of their lived experiences. Factors such as cultural and academic capital, family influence, socioeconomic status, peers, and potential

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<sup>8</sup> The Rio Grande Valley is comprised of four counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy) and has a population of 1.3 million residents. Latinos/as make up 89% of Cameron County, 91% of Hidalgo County, 96% of Starr County, and 88% of Willacy County. (See [www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/48489,48061,48427,48215,00](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045216/48489,48061,48427,48215,00))

employment opportunities also determine whether students attend or transfer to a 4-year college, including HSIs (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). Students at UTRGV fit this general profile. For the most part, students at UTRGV choose to attend college close to home because it is more affordable and they can remain close to family. Many students have additional responsibilities of caring for their own children, parents, and/or extended family members while working full-time jobs. Culturally, students have familial knowledge and experience centered in Mexican, Mexican-American, Anglo-American, and trans-national border cultures. Family, faith, and a strong work-ethic are central values. While Spanish is commonly heard in the halls and classrooms students vary in their levels of Spanish proficiency. According to the American Community Survey (2013), an estimated 80.4% of RGV residents are Spanish-speakers. Student skill level ranges from being fully bilingual, partially bilingual, or from having knowledge and understanding of Spanish as a heritage or home language (Brown et al., 2003; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Delgado-Gaitán, 2004; Núñez & Bowers, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

To capture the shift of the historical framework that represents the reality of lived experiences within a different time, space, and place, we adopted a multi-site ethnography as method for this inquiry. This methodological approach allows researchers to systematically chronicle, inquire, and examine the phenomenology within lived experiences (Marcus, 1995; Pierides, 2010). The authors propose this method as a tool for exploring the daily lives of people and communities within a world systems context. This method facilitates the study of academic initiatives that are cross-disciplined, as it probes two dynamic and purposeful cross-cultural racial projects (Omi & Winant, 2014). The projects are grounded in pedagogical strategies designed to influence the human conditions of students, organizations, and communities in two geographic spaces during two different times. The two communities are distinct and diverse in their composition and socio-political dynamics, yet both address issues of race, ethnicity, and culture in different ways. Examining these two distinct sites allows the research team to interrogate the stubborn systems that have sustained the status quo in universities and communities as it looks at institutional projects that aim to break the cycle of oppression, racism, and stagnation in higher education.

The data sources include student evaluations, student testimonials, and ethnographic notes of faculty members and administrators immersed in the work at both ethnographic sites. The ethnographic data, especially student testimonials of their transformational learning

experiences, supports the secondary literature that demonstrates the effectiveness of providing culturally relevant pedagogical methods such as building voice and story, community-based projects, and critical self-reflection that brings student knowledge and experience to higher education (Alvarez & Martínez, 2014; Guajardo & Guajardo 2017; Lara & Lara 2012). The authors analyze two racial projects through an examination of pedagogical, political, and transformational strategies to promote change for students and their communities. The purpose is to identify approaches to reframe the status quo (Guajardo et al., 2016) with a deliberate focus on points of contact or cultural fronts (Anzaldúa, 1987; González, 2001). This ethnography uses thick description (Geertz, 1973) to describe the moments of contact for people who come from different backgrounds and experiences. The method provides the space for narrative presentations of experiences and reflective thought by researchers and other participants who have lived these realities. The researchers have spent significant time at both sites at different times and understand the local histories, politics, racial, and cross-cultural experiences.

### **Construction of a Racial Theory in Practice**

Race is a signifier and concept that is generative, continuously contested, and informed by a socio-historical amalgamation of events and actions informed by place, values, bias, and preconceived notions. This article proposes a framework shaped by place and people who are in relationship, engaged in institution building, and whose collective histories inspire their work. One clear assumption is to move beyond the idea that race is a biological issue. Ornstein (1993) tells us that biology matters little when discussing issues of race, and ample scientific research demonstrates this position (Wexler, 2010). Though biological premises serve as a sorting trait, science establishes there is little difference between races. The issue of race is largely a social construction grounded in socio-historical perspectives and human actions based on ill-conceived beliefs, values, and misconceptions.

This article considers the following theories to make meaning of racial phenomena. The racial formation process outlined by Omi and Winant (2014) acknowledges that racial formation is a deliberate action. Numerous examples in the history of the United States have revealed racial projects intended to hold people of color in marginalized spaces. These projects range from the micro-level of daily lived experiences to the macro-level of structural

interventions to create barriers to equal opportunity through policy, legislation, and practices. The historical practices marked by chattel slavery, de jure and de facto racial segregation, community planning practices, and school segregation establish a clear pattern and narrative. This pattern has also been contested through persistent efforts to right the historical wrongs of this country's history. This emerging theory has utility in responding to meta-level analysis and mapping the socio-historical racial formation of communities.

González's (2001) cultural fronts, a framework akin to Anzaldúa's (1987) third space, or Borderland, find appropriate theoretical convergence. They speak to the unique intersection that is negotiated by diverse groups who come to the common space with varied experiences, values, and histories. The construction of this contact creates a new reality. The concept of cultural fronts is descriptive for the point of contact that creates the blending of two or more realities. The cultural front is a place of tension created when differences meet. This tension can be the impetus for creativity or conflict. The context and learning are dependent upon the preparation and facilitation of this contact.

An additional construct useful to this emerging theory is a framework advanced by Guajardo et al. (2016) to "make meaning" of this provocative racial exchange and phenomenon. This framework is guided by a dynamic-critical pedagogy that highlights the learning and development of people, organizations, and communities (Guajardo et al., 2016). It is a process that crosses boundaries and is informed by five axioms: 1) Learning and leadership are a dynamic social process; 2) Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes; 3) The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns; 4) Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process; and 5) Hope and change are built upon assets and dreams of locals and their communities.

These axioms are situated within a set of ecologies of knowing that span from the micro-level of the self, to the meso-level of organizations, and the macro-level of community, policy, and economy. This framework inspires and produces a dynamic theory of change. It is generative and allows for the topic to be identified, the point of contact to be negotiated, and for participants to be creators of knowledge and agents of their own transformation. We apply this framework to our pedagogical and institution-building practices. In the UNF experience for example, interracial activities and assignments formed the essence of the teaching and learning. In the UTRGV experience, the integration of bilingual and bicultural curricular development

shaped the new identity of the institution. Courses are taught across disciplines in Spanish and bilingually through the use of culturally relevant practices. Partnerships with community-based organizations also enhance community participation in shaping an education responsive to the people of the region.

### **Lived Experiences as Observables: The Experiment at the University of North Florida**

“The Human Conflict in Black and White” course offers an appropriate micro example of how to engage the challenging issues of race, ethnicity, and history. When “Conflict” was created in the early 1970s, it probed deeply-ingrained attitudes about race held by both Black and White students through an intensive interactive process where students were required to live in different and often uncomfortable physical, social, and cultural spaces. An examination of the class shows a social and political context of notable racial tension. Approximately 90 undergraduate students across disciplines enrolled in the course over a six-year period. Taught by a licensed psychologist, course requirements included small group discussions of racial issues in a gracious space. Gracious space refers to a learning environment that promotes open and honest dialogue; it engenders climate that invites the stranger to learn in public (Hughes, 2004).

An important formative step in the implementation of the class was relationship-building between the professor and students, which led to a degree of trust necessary to cross racial borders. The learning taking place in this context allowed the strangers, in this case Black and White students and families, to co-construct a learning exchange that confronted issues of race, class, and other differences (Hughes, 2004). The learning space facilitated by the instructor allowed for a generative exploration of self, community, and society within a dialogical process driven by the students to places, spaces, and time where differences met. They read about racial issues, kept personal journals about relevant experiences, visited an HBCU, and spent a week in the home of someone from a different racial background. The interactive nature of the course compelled students to explore and define personal racial convictions in significant depth. Students realized their own prejudices, biases, and misconceptions as they listened to people from different lived realities. They found that the lack of personal contact with the different racial group engendered their ignorance and racialistic thought and behavior. Students came to understand their own negativity, which was often born from unfounded ideas. In addition to

helping class members learn about a different race, the experience enhanced personal development and self-discovery.

While enrolled in the class, two students, an African American student named Ann and a White student named Judi, reflected on the transformative pedagogical act of being in the same physical space with people of different races. In written testimony, Ann wrote that the class forced her to think differently about herself through a different racial lens. She stated that she would not have had this kind of experience had she not been invited to do so through the class and she argued that her understanding of race was enhanced through the experience. Growing up Black in the deep South kept her from having intimate conversations and exchanges with White people. She asserted that the class forced her to engage in a new cultural front and thereby, her views on race would be changed forever. Similarly, Judi reflected as she wrote about the prejudices that existed in her family growing up White in Jacksonville and how her Whiteness would be shaped out of this lived experience. Her close personal contact with Black students in the class compelled her to rethink her misconceptions about Black people. For both Ann and Judi, the class was instrumental in changing attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about members of the other group. Because the class fostered honest dialogue between the two groups, students' views on race were questioned, discussed and transformed through difficult dialogue. Students' personal growth was further enhanced by the requirement of a 7-day home visit with a family of the other race.

In a 20-year follow-up study, which included a reunion of the students from these classes, students reported that their experience was indeed profound and life-changing. Their responses reflected the transformative learning that occurred in the classes held during the 1970s. Students who took "Conflict in Black and White" and followed through with course requirements acknowledged that their previous implicit biases and prejudices were significantly altered. By going through this process, the students formed close interpersonal relationships (Kranz, Lund & Johnson, 1996; Kranz et al., 2005). The "Human Conflict in Black and White" class created the opportunities for the overlapping of the life worlds of students and communities with the systems world of faculty and university administration (Sergiovanni, 1999). The experience afforded faculty the opportunity to take pedagogical risks by engaging with sensitive and provocative issues pertaining to racial realities. Students reaped the rewards, as their testimonials demonstrated (Kranz et al., 2005).

One major reason “Human Conflict in Black and White” in the 1970's was successful and received national media attention (Thurow, 1997) was due to the university administration’s strong support for the innovative courses of the Venture Studies program. The department chairs, deans, provost, and president had a clear vision for the university that embraced ground breaking courses in all major fields that challenged student perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. The administration encouraged innovation and creativity; their only mandate was to make courses relevant to regional socio-historical conditions. As risk-taking was encouraged, faculty explored new material and teaching methods without fear of repercussions or censure. Student discomfort was anticipated, as these courses extended beyond the typical structure of lecture-only classes. The student was not to be a passive recipient of knowledge but was to be an active learner involved in the community and in dialogue with one another. The result was that students often found themselves reaching beyond their comfort zone as they explored new internal attitudes and external learning possibilities (Kranz et al., 2005).

The course fostered an exciting environment for creative and engaged learning. The positive working relationship created between faculty and administration enhanced trust and commitment to meaningful educational experiences for students and faculty. This point of innovation reflected in practice is supported by our conceptual framework of cultural fronts. When the dynamic critical pedagogy is employed, as evidenced in the UNF class experience, the opportunity for creating a new awareness for student, community partners, and the institution is presented. This dynamic bond added unique value to the learning process that went beyond typical academic pedagogical practices in higher education. This innovation challenged the students to critically think about where they were and where they needed to be and the critical self-reflection enabled students to confront their own knowledge. It is this opportunity for innovation that establishes the relationship between the UNF experience and the lived experience in UTRGV. Through multi-sited ethnography, we can transfer lessons learned from UNF to a different socio-cultural context and lived experience in a different time, space, and place. Student learning at UTRGV occurs within the context of the cultural front of the border region.

## **Expanding Access in a New HSI along the Texas-Mexico Border**

In 2013, the University of Texas Pan American and the University of Texas at Brownsville were dissolved and merged by legislative mandate to create a new regional state university to serve South Texas. The legacy schools have historical roots in the region as they had important functions in community and regional development. They existed throughout the nineteenth hundreds as comparatively under-resourced institutions. Although both joined the University of Texas System in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, underfunding persisted for much of their existence. The move to dissolve, merge, and recreate was driven by the need to make greater investments in the development of the region, including higher education and healthcare. With the merger, the opportunity to access the Permanent University Fund (PUF), the multi-billion-dollar endowment of the University of Texas System became possible for the first time in the institution's history.

Between the time the Texas legislature passed a bill to create the new university in 2013 and the time the university officially opened in September 2015, approximately one-half billion dollars were invested to develop the physical infrastructure of the new institution. A new medical school was built, along with a new science building, and many other brick and mortar additions that would change the look of higher education along the border. Scaffolds, cranes, and a new wave of brown-skinned construction workers would characterize the compelling portrait of the emerging university landscape. The physical layout of the university would never appear the same. In the face of the new construction, a new university with a new strategic plan emerged. Therein, it promises to pursue the following HSI-congruent goals: (1) it will build a bicultural, bilingual, biliterate infrastructure; 2) it will engage community through curricular and programmatic strategies, and (3) it will become a leading HIS in the United States. The remainder of the article highlights early actions guided by this strategic plan and lessons from Venture Studies program.

A historical reflection of how the legacy university viewed the local language is captured in a story told by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describing the taming of "a wild tongue." This story offers a poignant historical context that also serves as parable for the region. Anzaldúa attended Pan American College as a young woman, but before she enrolled she was first subjected to a speech test as part of a course placement practice. The practice was typically reserved for Mexican American students who may have spoken with thick accents. If they spoke with a

detectable accent they would be expeditiously dispatched to a remedial speech class, where their “wild tongues” would presumably be “tamed” (Anzaldúa, 1987; Cole & Johnson, 2014). The story of taming the wild tongue is not unique to the history of south Texas. College-going students from the Bronx, New York similarly had their pronounced Bronx accents rehabilitated when they attended any of the CUNY schools in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Deborah Meier, who grew up in New York in the 1950s recalls, “My Jewish peers were forced to fix their accents, but so were Italians, Irish, and other kids from the Bronx” (Meier, 2016). College-going students from Appalachian regions and youth from other parts of the country faced similar institutional attitudes against regional and cultural speech patterns (Davis, D., personal communication with Francisco Guajardo, February 16, 2016).

Anzaldúa’s wild tongue experience implies much more than a linguistic adjustment and requires deeper levels of analysis. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mexican-origin population in south Texas had thus been established as a minority group generally subjected to the socio-political and economic conditions of the Jim Crow South (Barrera, 1979; Blanton, 2004; Montejano, 1987; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; San Miguel, 1987; Woodward, 1974). The advent of railroads and large-scale irrigation technologies pushed the old economy of ranching to the annals of history and gave way to a new capitalized agricultural economy. The region would be marketed as “the Magic Valley,” a tropical paradise with fertile land, good year-round weather, and cheap Mexican labor (Brannstrom & Newman, 2009; Montejano, 1987; Zamora, 1993). A two-tiered society emerged, where young Mexican Americans were more useful as agricultural or manual laborers than as students in which to invest academic capital. Their ability to pick crops and clear fields mattered more to employers than their academic abilities, refined speaking, or intellectual capacities (Acuña, 1988; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; González, 1990). Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mexican Americans were discouraged from attending college due to economic and social reasons—Mexican Americans could not afford to pay for college and local growers and others did not perceive the educational advancement of Mexican Americans as expedient (Avila & Pankake, 2016; Guajardo & Guajardo 2004). Anzaldúa came of age within this socio-cultural milieu, a reality that would later in life inspire her to theorize about growing up in this borderland. The repressive racialist and linguistic practices of the university represented practices common across the region in what emerged as a place that instituted real and symbolic borders for Mexican-origin people.

Even as an increasing number of Mexican American students gained access to this university in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, institutional practices such as the speech test, failure to recruit and retain a diverse faculty, and a chronic level of underinvestment in the public-school system across the region presented systemic barriers for this group. The wild tongue was much more than a matter of language; it also implicated race, class, regional development, and acceptance of Mexican Americans as second-class citizens (Montejano, 1987; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). The wild tongue symbolized more than speech—it represented an ethos that established a collective expectation for an entire community.

While attitudes of the wild tongue persisted through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, broad socio-cultural and economic changes were set in motion in the late 1960s and 1970s that fostered social, political, and institutional change. In 1966, local melon farm workers staged a strike against melon farmers to protest low wages, poor working conditions, and unfair labor practices. Two years later, local high school students followed others across the Southwest and staged a series of walkouts to protest systemic injustices marked by racism and other forms of discrimination, including language suppression (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; Muñoz, 2007; Navarro, 1995). The impulses for change mirrored the macro forces of the larger civil rights movement aimed at creating a more just society.

In this borderlands region, an irony materialized when Anzaldúa's alma mater emerged as an important incubator for regional transformation. As more Mexican American students enrolled at the university in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and as many began to graduate, a Mexican American middle-class developed. As the old millennium gave way to the next, a new consciousness began to take root, and a strategic push for a more significant investment in higher education for Latinas/os eventually made its way into the halls of the Texas Legislature (Flack, 2003; Santiago, 2011). Compelled by legal action, the argument at the legislature centered upon the historic underinvestment of higher education along the Texas-Mexico border, and the pressing need to respond to the economic, healthcare, and educational needs of the community. When the governing body proposed a set of principles to guide the creation of the new university, including a move to promote "bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate" programming, it evolved from an institution that "tamed a wild tongue" to one that advocated for bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy.

Over the years, changes have been palpable at the legacy institutions in terms of physical

facilities and academic programming that encourages students to critically evaluate issues of race, ethnicity, culture, language, and history. Similar to students who took “Human Conflict” and like courses in the Venture Studies program, students who enroll in Mexican American Studies (MAS) courses report benefiting from “life changing” experiences when for the first time read Rodolfo Acuña (1988), engaged with Anzaldúa’s Borderlands theory, or discovered critical race theory (CRT) as a lens of analysis. Like the Venture Studies program that was created at UNF in the early 1970s, Mexican American/Chicano Studies also came of age in the early 1970s and shaped by events that occurred during the Civil Rights era. The programs initially emerged as Chicano Studies programs within colleges and universities in California and other states in the Southwest, however they are now found in colleges and universities across the nation.

While Mexican American Studies at UTRGV has existed in different forms, the transdisciplinary nature of the current program offers students the opportunity to critically analyze issues of ethnicity, race, class, culture, language, and political economy in the context of their own lived experiences and that of their families and communities. Students and faculty reflect upon the seeming reversal of hegemonic forces. They sense a transformation that is personal, institutional, and regional in the emerging work guided by culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogical practices. Writing for *Excelencia in Education*, a nonprofit research organization, Gina García argues that scholars have long advocated for “the importance of developing curricular and pedagogical practices that are centered on the experiences of minoritized students. These types of curricula not only recognize the voices and experiences of Students of Color, but they encourage critical consciousness and community engagement. The most obvious curricula to model are those found in ethnic studies departments” (García, n.d.). Amanda T. illuminates the impact of MAS on her education:

I was alienated from my inner most self for most of my life. Lacking direction in life I would drop out of both UTPA and STC in 2010. I credit this mostly to my inability to identify with the materials being taught to me...With the guidance of a former friend I was encouraged to return to school in the fall of 2012. In a U.S. History course, I would come across *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa and suddenly everything changed. I learned to embrace my true self.

Like Amanda, other students emphasize the liberating impact of being in class where bilingualism is valued and where their experiences, viewpoints, and history are central to course content, discussion, and analyses. In reflecting upon her experience, Leslie S. states,

The first MAS course I took was in the spring semester of 2016...I quickly became very engaged in the lectures and course work because it was an aspect of American history that I had never learned. In high school, the only time they mention a Mexican American at any point in American history is when you're taught about the accomplishments of Cesar Chavez and even then, the lesson is very brief. History is taught showcasing the accomplishments and shortcomings of White men throughout American history, the accomplishments and struggle faced by Black men in the Civil Rights movement with a little bit of White feminism thrown in there with a lesson or two on the women's suffrage movement and its leaders...In this course, I realized just how excluded I was as an American; as if the history of Mexican Americans doesn't count or didn't quite make the cut in order to be seen as important...I felt like American history happened around Mexican Americans, not with Mexican Americans. It wasn't until I took Mexican American History and Mexican American Civil Rights in the fall of 2016 that I realized just how wrong I was. Taking MAS courses has had a great impact on my life...I have a greater sense of self and admiration of my culture and a newfound respect of both my parents and grandparents who have worked so hard to give me the opportunities that I have had.

Similarly, Jesus S. emphasized the importance of curriculum in student learning:

[MAS] has given me an opportunity to learn about my history. MAS has opened many doors in which I have developed many close friendships and mentors that are supportive of the work that we do. I was always interested in knowing more of our history and started taking courses in Mexican American history and felt that it was a major that would suit me. When I was about to finish my undergrad, I was still confused and did not know what I wanted to do. I was advised on continuing my education and now I'm almost done with my MAIS MAS. I am currently also teaching a class and the students that I had in my class

were very grateful and thankful. ... They need to see that they are reflected in the classroom.

The above testimonials were provided by the students to the author when asked to reflect on their experiences and the impact Mexican American Studies had on their educational processes, critical awareness, and drive to continue their education beyond their undergraduate degree. These students took Mexican American history courses for the first time in their academic careers in college. These courses incorporated requirements that encouraged students to explore family and community histories through oral history projects and reflective assignments that connected their lived experiences to the history of the region and its people. Students' exploration of their family histories invites them to reflect on their lived realities and explore a critical awareness of their own position in life and the world in which they live.

The critical nature of Mexican American Studies curricula and pedagogical practices enables students to interrogate ancestral knowledge so that they might connect it and their story to prior knowledge that has been explored at different points in their lives. Knowledge construction is a relational process that occurs in both a local and a global context. In the case of these students, constructing knowledge occurs in a transnational context within the Texas-Mexico borderlands and is the brand of pedagogy that is practiced in MAS at UTRGV. Multiple cultural fronts in the context of UTRGV is the coming together of life stories, culture, language, politics, ways of knowing, and different systems of inquiry. This is done through the community-based learning in cooperation with local organizations that focuses on applying student knowledge to their history, wisdom, and power.

### **Discussion**

Contemporary higher education environments bristle with racial hostility and administrators often respond with reactive approaches. National media tend to shine a spotlight on issues that have led to the dismissal of university personnel and contentious environments on college campuses. The experiment at UNF and initiatives that focus on critical reflection and cross-cultural understanding can mitigate historical and systemic prejudice and discrimination and more needs to be done in this regard. Like UNF, UTRGV can expand curriculum and programming to promote cultural competence vis-à-vis students, faculty, curriculum, and the

institution itself. Participants in the “Human Conflict in Black and White” course found that when constructive dialogue on issues of race occurred, greater understanding between the two groups evolved.

The success of the lived experience in the 1970s can be attributed to administrative leadership and faculty support. Similarly, faculty, administrators, and community at this borderlands HSI should work together to develop innovative educational curricula that prepare students to address complex challenges such as redressing historical discrimination and inequities in education, reducing labor force segmentation, and shaping public policy. As university class sizes increase to raise revenues, the quality of education often suffers and obscures issues of inequity. Small classes, once the hallmark of an enriched academic experience, are quickly disappearing. The business ethos of higher education is replacing the innovative, creative spirit that once energized both students and faculty. If universities are to continue to be a central force in the exchange of ideas, discussion, and debate of different theoretical positions and philosophical tenets, the face-to-face dynamic between faculty and students must be preserved. Relational processes in smaller teaching and face-to-face learning environments work most effectively for first-generation, minority student populations (Delgado-Gaitán, 2004; Trueba, 2004). The values that nurture this development are access, excellence, and relationships. In contrast, we have witnessed a move towards efficiency, choice, and accountability in which systems are pushed to produce numbers rather than smaller faculty-student ratios and other investments in relational processes.

The attitude and philosophy of "getting students in and out" in accelerated time to boost graduation numbers and revenue does not bespeak of quality education that promotes an exchange of ideas and academic capital (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). The business model of higher education counters educational wisdom of providing students with an equitable education that fosters their intellectual growth and development, self-knowledge and self-discovery to their fullest potential (Gándara, 1995). This model perpetuates an educational system that focuses on skills development in preparation for the workforce to satisfy the needs of labor markets and to produce loyal citizen-workers rather than one that develops human capital, cultivates local knowledge, and produces critical thinkers.

The example of UNF offers a model of leadership and guidance. When university administrators establish an environment for innovation and when they encourage faculty to

experiment with teaching and learning approaches, some faculty members respond. Such was the case with the course entitled “Human Conflict in Black and White.” While UTRGV has experienced a change in name and is undergoing dramatic transformation in physical infrastructure, it is also changing the university’s cultural values and practices.

Through multi-sited ethnography, we have been privileged to explore a point of innovation from a Black and White binary experience of the past, while living in the space, place, and time of an institution that is in the process of becoming a new brand of HSI. This work proposes that we learn from the past lived experiences of its members. We employ a dynamic critical pedagogy and encourage the development of the socio-cultural and political context that responds and respects its local ecology. This process of engagement invites students and their families to develop a collective way of imagining the future and its processes in becoming an HSI that goes beyond the quantifiable measures of its student population. This brand of HSI becomes proactive in community-building, pedagogical development, and regional development that respects its stakeholders and their process of becoming fuller human beings. UTRGV is geographically and historically situated in borderlands that allow for the theorization of cultural fronts and we propose this too as a viable conceptual framework for theorizing and reframing the conversations about HSIs. The opportunity to look back at the Venture Studies at UNF allows us to see the possibilities of applying the cultural fronts theoretical framework not only to HSIs, but to any racial project to incorporate local experiences. From a historical perspective, there is value in learning from the diverse experiences of racial projects of the past. The value here is that we bring together scholars from different disciplines who have diverse lived experiences to populate this theoretical framework of cultural fronts.

Leading social change and in this case, educational change, is a slow process. What strategies and approaches can UTRGV implement to be most effective in leading change that embodies the guiding principles it espouses to “...produce state, national and world leaders who are bicultural, bilingual and biliterate,” and to “become one of the largest and most successful Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the country?” These are important and relevant questions for UTRGV to consider given its historical development, geographic location, student population, and the community it serves.

To its credit, UTRGV has seen tangible developments toward innovation and creativity specific to present-day regional and socio-cultural realities. In uniting two universities that

served traditional functions, the new HSI is attempting to address the specific conditions of its population. The two original legacy institutions experimented with infusing regional linguistic and other cultural elements into coursework, but the efforts were under development. In its new iteration, UTRGV is taking the bold step of addressing bilingual, bicultural, and biliteracy as builds its B3 institute to support and foster bilingualism. It has moved one step closer by teaching courses in Spanish and bilingually. In building a new partnership between faculty, administrators, school districts, and the community, UTRGV is working with community leaders and organizations to integrate community knowledge, expertise, and needs into its curriculum, programs, and community engagement projects. Mexican American Studies faculty along with faculty across the university work to develop curricula and community-based projects that build on the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of the community and informs teaching, research, and service.

### **Recommendations**

Research on best practices of HSIs that have developed programs, initiatives, partnerships, and services to promote Latina/o student perseverance, academic success and college completion rates demonstrate that the model for Latina/o student success looks different than at traditional majority White institutions (Benítez & De Aro, 2004; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Nuñez & Bowers, 2011). This research offers recommendations regarding what works for Latina/o students to achieve academic success and facilitates the process of changing higher education to serve these students more appropriately and responsibly (Evans, 2009; Hagedorn et al., 2007; Greene et al., 2012; Lara & Lara, 2012; Núñez et al., 2010; Núñez, Crisp, & Elizondo, 2016; Verdugo, 1995). These recommendations are divided into two categories—life worlds and systems worlds.

Improving life worlds requires increasing the number of faculty who understand the culture, language, and experience of Mexican-origin students, and can teach courses that provide culturally and linguistically relevant material. UTRGV can identify and hire faculty and administrators who have an awareness of the local ecology, its people, and culture and who are ready to teach courses in a bilingual and bicultural learning environment. Much of the HSI literature points to the importance of increasing the number of Latina/o faculty and administrators who have direct experience in working with Latina/o students and can provide

culturally responsive mentorship and advising (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Ruíz & Valverde, 2012). Considering UTRGV's student demographic and location, it has a relatively low number of Latina/o faculty. Out of 1,345 faculty, 506 (37.6%) identify as Hispanic or Latino. Of these 267 (52.8%) are lecturers with the remaining 239 (47.2%) being full-time faculty. These figures indicate that more than half of UTRGV's Hispanic/Latino faculty are lecturers and only 17.8% are full-time faculty.<sup>9</sup> The low number of full-time faculty reduces the number of faculty who can serve as role models, advisers, and mentors and potentially the number who can or are willing to offer linguistically responsive courses. These low numbers, combined with UTRGV's predominately Mexican-origin student population, suggest this recommendation is even more pressing. Another recommendation includes incorporating student perspectives in university curricula and policies to provide a more equitable education because it can foster a sense of belonging and empowerment, two factors that are known to influence student choice when attending an HSI (Nuñez & Bowers, 2011). Courses that encourage students to draw from and enhance cultural knowledge and linguistic skills and placed-based community projects in the core curriculum, promote educational equity by enabling students to draw from their "funds of knowledge" and "cultural wealth" (Gonzales, 2016; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Yosso, 2005).

UTRGV currently has the capacity to integrate the "cultural" and linguistic components of the guiding principles and enhance life worlds through an expanded investment in its MAS program. Historically, this interdisciplinary program aimed to fundamentally change higher education to meet the needs of Mexican American/Chicana/o students. Student activists of the Chicano Movement viewed higher education as more than a means to obtaining a job. Rather, it was about developing a critical consciousness informed by a socio-cultural understanding of Chicanas/os' role and place in American society. They wanted to connect learning in higher education to their communities through community-based research that would address historical issues of poverty, employment discrimination, educational inequalities, health disparities, and poor infrastructure in *barrios* and *colonias* (Muñoz, 2007). For Chicana/o activists of the late 1960s, knowledge of their history, culture, language, and lived experiences became

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<sup>9</sup> Of the 1,345 faculty, 590 are female and 755 are male. Of the 506 Hispanic/Latina/o faculty, 271 are female and 235 are male. Of the 239 Hispanic/Latino lecturers, 125 are female and 11 are male. These figures were provided by UTRGV's Office of Institutional Research.

sources of action toward the public good (Freire, 2000; Mariscal, 2005; Muñoz, 2007; Peña, 2010). In advocating for a culturally relevant college curriculum, student activists of the day recognized the importance of the Spanish language in their identities, cultural heritage, and knowledge. Thus, a curriculum that cultivated bilingualism and biculturalism made sense to them:

The present needs of the Chicano must be met in such a way as to provide relevant programs which will sustain self-confidence and provide a feeling of acceptance on the student's terms...bi-lingual studies must constitute a part of the University's realistic recognition of community realities and innovative academic potential...to develop student's abilities in a bilingual, bicultural manner...by focusing on an intellectual perspective of and about the Spanish-speaking communities, [and] to develop a potential for self-fulfillment in at least two cultures (Muñoz, 2007, p. 158).

Looking back at the original intent of Chicana/o Studies reminds us that students were active in advocating and crafting, the type and quality of education they viewed as relevant for themselves and their communities. In addition to a curriculum that fostered their cultural and linguistic capital, students called for the recruitment of Mexican American students, faculty, counselors, and administrators and research programs as a vehicle for producing knowledge through community-based research and for developing bilingual and bicultural community leaders. These goals fall in line with UTRGV's B3 Institute and recommendations offered by the extant HSI research.

Improving the systems worlds calls for HSIs to develop and establish partnerships with local K-12 school districts to create curriculum that fosters students' bilingualism and biculturalism and in this manner, enhance students' academic capital. The Center for Bilingual Studies, a division of the B3 Institute, works to develop the faculty and research capacities in the areas of bilingualism and biliteracy of faculty and public school teachers. Administrators should also find way to increase financial investments in research and knowledge production to address issues faced by local communities. Studies have established that increasing financial aid to students from low-income families promotes student success by reducing their need to work more than 20 hours per week, as most students at UTRGV do (Evans, 2004). The need to

work full-time to pay for college often functions as a barrier to college completion and impedes their time-to-degree progress. When we align curriculum to student and local community needs, we help student resolve issues in their communities and respond to issues in their lives. Self-assessment of HSI systems, programs and services is also encouraged to ensure that they have the resources and mechanisms in place to respond to the needs of students and their communities.

### **Conclusion**

The emerging framework that encompasses two ethnographic sites helps us make sense of the task at hand. The Venture Studies program at UNF engendered the creative capacities of faculty to engage the most challenging issues of the day. In the 1970s, the course “Human Conflict in Black and White” tackled the issue of race in creative and transformative ways. Testimonials from students and faculty point to the undeniable success of the Venture Studies experiment. Students took the lessons from the class and used those lessons to enrich their cultural and racial lives, even if the institution did not sustain its investment in this aspect of the Venture Studies program. The creativity that marked its success evaporated when faculty moved on and the university’s leadership changed.

UTRVG can learn from the Venture Studies program as it attempts to embed issues of race, culture and history to shape its new institutional ethos. UTRGV exists in a place Anzaldúa (1987) described as “an open wound”; a place that requires healing through a process of critical self-reflection and an honest critique of the institutions that have created the very “wound” Anzaldúa described. Whereas the “Human Conflict in Black and White” Venture Studies course focused on the wounds of the Old South, MAS courses can heal the “open wound” by affirming the cultural and historic identity of this borderlands region. The work at this HSI thus provides a framework for expanding the meaning of access, excellence, and equity in higher education to specifically serve Latina/o students. Providing a more equitable education for Latinas/os within the context of a new political economy informed by the history, culture, and economic realities of this border region requires a more intentional goal to serve the students, families and communities that populate this HSI. It is our intention to guide the conversation regarding the critical role HSIs play in providing Latinas/os access to an effective, culturally appropriate educational experience relevant to their communities and current socio-economic realities.

Researchers call upon HSIs to provide Latina/o students with the academic capital to be culturally informed to serve families, communities, schools, and businesses in an ever-changing social, cultural, economic, and transnational environment (García, 2012; Gonzales, 2016; Núñez et al., 2010). Within a short time of operation, UTRGV is cultivating and expanding students' and the community's knowledge by fostering innovative research, appropriate teaching methods, and community projects with the goals of supporting students in becoming culturally and linguistically informed. The creation of the B3 Institute has empowered UTRGV to direct and move the university toward instituting the guiding principles of producing bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate students. The institution is thus poised to take the lead in promoting social change and fostering the paradigm-shift of higher education for HSIs to provide broader access to a more equitable education that enhances "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) for students and the communities in which they live.

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