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Examining Racial Discourse in Equity Reports: Florida's Public Hispanic Serving Institutions

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Abstract: Public Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) play a prominent role in educating racially minoritized students, thus making them valuable sites for examining higher education increased attention to state and institution-level diversity policy and plans. Institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plans, serve as public statements regarding institutional priorities, illuminate how racial equity is centered or decentered. This research engages 10 Equity Reports at public two-year and four-year HSIs in Florida. Through the lens of critical race theory and LatCrit, the analysis foregrounds patterns regarding institutional discourse, in response to state policy mandates, considering the intersection of HSI designation and institutional type. The findings illustrate how the Equity Reports decenter racial equity, reflect a sparse substantive mention of Latinx students, and only superficially engages with the HSIs designation. The findings expand the analysis of HSIs to a new sociopolitical context, providing a broader view of HSIs, and provide policymakers and implementers with tools to consider racial equity through DEI policy.

Keywords: diversity; equity and inclusion policy; higher education policy; CRT; LatCrit

Examinando el discurso racial en los informes de equidad: Instituciones públicas que atienden a los hispanos en Florida

Resumen: Las instituciones públicas que atienden a los hispanos (HSI) desempeñan un papel destacado en la educación de estudiantes de minorías raciales, lo que las convierte en

sitios valiosos para examinar la mayor atención de la educación superior a las políticas y planes de diversidad a nivel estatal e institucional. Esta investigación se basa en la teoría crítica de la raza y LatCrit para examinar los informes de equidad en 10 HSI públicos en Florida. Al observar Florida Equity Reports, una respuesta a los mandatos de políticas estatales, este trabajo considera el discurso de diversidad construido en estos planes y cómo se centra en los estudiantes latinos. Los hallazgos ilustran cómo los Equity Reports descentran la equidad racial, reflejan una escasa mención sustantiva de los estudiantes latinos y se relacionan superficialmente con la designación de HSI. Los hallazgos amplían el análisis de las HSI dentro de un nuevo contexto sociopolítico, brindando una visión más amplia de las HSI y herramientas para que los encargados de la formulación de políticas y los implementadores consideren la equidad racial a través de las políticas públicas.

Palabras-clave: diversidad; política de equidad e inclusión; política de educación superior; CRT; LatCrit

Examinando o discurso racial em relatórios de equidade: Instituições públicas que atendem hispânicos na Flórida

Resumo: As instituições públicas que atendem hispânicos (HSIs) desempenham um papel proeminente na educação de estudantes de minorias raciais, tornando-as locais valiosos para examinar a atenção crescente do ensino superior para políticas e planos de diversidade em nível estadual e institucional. Esta pesquisa baseia-se na teoria crítica da raça e no LatCrit para examinar os Relatórios de Equidade em 10 HSIs públicos na Flórida. Ao olhar para os Relatórios de Equidade da Flórida, uma resposta aos mandatos de políticas estaduais, este trabalho considera o discurso de diversidade construído nesses planos e como ele se concentra nos estudantes latinos. As descobertas ilustram como os Relatórios de Equidade descentralizam a equidade racial, refletem uma menção substantiva esparsa de estudantes latinos e se envolvem superficialmente com a designação de HSIs. Os resultados expandem a análise de HSIs dentro de um novo contexto sociopolítico, fornecendo uma visão mais ampla de HSIs e ferramentas para formuladores de políticas e implementadores considerarem a equidade racial por meio de políticas públicas.

Palavras-chave: diversidade; política de equidade e inclusão; política de ensino superior; CRT; LatCrit

Examining Racial Discourse in Equity Reports: Florida's Public Hispanic Serving Institutions

The establishment and expansion of higher education has historically been a propertied, White Christian male project. However, over time, higher education has diversified across many facets, including gender, class, and race. Currently, racially minoritized students represent 39% of undergraduate students, with Latinx¹ students alone representing approximately 20% (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). Of the Latinx students, 67% attend a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), institutions that are predominantly open-access institutions (Excellency in Education, 2021; Felix & Trinidad, 2020). The

¹ Across this paper, the term Latinx will be used when appropriate to advance a more inclusive discussion about students and the communities that higher education can aspire to serve. As such, despite its problematic nature, Hispanic is nonetheless used across policy and thus used here to mirror terms from policy or other scholarly work.

enrollment-based nature of the HSI designation, 25% of the student population is Latinx and at least 50% are eligible for need-based aid (U.S. Department Education, n.d.), distinguishes HSIs from historically black colleges and universities or tribal colleges and universities which were established to support Black and Indigenous students. Thus, as Latinx student enrollment increases, so too does the number of HSIs - between 1994-2017, HSIs grew by 200%, with over 500 HSIs in 2020 (Excelencia in Education, 2021). How HSIs cultivate an identity that moves beyond enrollment to one that serves Latinx students situates the important role these institutions can play in advancing racial equity (Contreras et al., 2008; Garcia, 2018).

At the state level, legislatures and governing boards are critical sites for developing policies and implementation guidance to advance equitable engagement for racially minoritized students (Rall et al., 2020). These policies become sites “infused with values people hold about equity, [thus] examining the plans with a critical eye is needed to elicit their actual meaning” (Ching et al., 2018, p. 825). Yet, considering how equity documents push against White hegemony or serve as a technology to advance diversity rhetoric while perpetuating inequity at HSIs has largely gone unconsidered. Given the central role of HSIs, a critical examination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policy implementation – through the examination of institutional plans – allows for an unpacking of the discourse emerging in these documents (Ching et al., 2018; Iverson, 2005).

To broaden an understanding of the role of HSIs across a diversity of geographic and policy contexts, this research considers two interrelated questions – how does the institutional discourse at public HSIs in Florida construct a framing of racial diversity within their Equity Reports, particularly Latinx students? How is this discourse similar and different across two-year and four-year institutions? This work, framed through the threading of the critical race theory (CRT) and LatCrit, expands the narrative of HSIs beyond the institutions in the West and Southwest – some of the primary sites for inquiries into HSIs – to further a robust understanding of the growing role of HSIs across the US.

To explore these questions, the research is situated in the existing literature surrounding racialized Latinx identity, HSI organizational development, and racial equity policy within higher education. Further, it is informed by the sociopolitical backdrop of Florida, which frames the demographic and policy landscape. The resulting findings capture the institutional discourse and illuminate aspects of the institution’s organizational identity, including the HSI designation salience, to consider how the discourse within the Equity Reports advances racial equity. Situating these findings in the broader HSI literature supports implications for policymakers and practitioners interested in leveraging DEI policy to support racial equity.

Literature Review

Race has a complex history that threads through the origins and evolution of U.S. higher education. Within higher education, the civil rights era served as a historical flashpoint spurring initiatives to advance racial diversity – pushing back against segregation and increasing equal opportunity. Over time, institutional discourse that has shifted from discussions of access to “reveal and revise the racist policies and adverse practices” ,followed by prioritizing racial representation and recent transitions that engage race-neutral strategies (Jones et al., 2017; Valverde, 2011).

Interrogating Florida Equity Reports at HSIs requires the situating of this discourse within a broader discussion regarding race in the U.S. alongside higher education racial equity policy research, including the utilization of CRT to advances these research aims. These two bodies of literature as thus nested within the HSI landscape, positioning the extent to which the designation shapes the institution's mission and organizational culture (Cuellar & Johnson-Whorl, 2016; Garcia, 2016, 2019). As such, this research expands upon an understanding of the racialized nature of these

institutions and the implications of state policy, directly addressing a gap in our understanding of HSIs (Garcia, 2019; Garcia & Hudson, 2020).

Racial Social Systems and the Latinx Community

Centering racism in U.S. higher education, at the individual and structural levels, necessitates grappling with the reality that despite its social construction, race continues to be a salient feature of U.S. life which (re)produces inequities across higher education (Yanow, 2002). As U.S. demographics shift, racial categorizations conceptualized across a Black-white binary have been tested yielding new theories, such as tri-racial hierarchy, variegating the racial hierarchy continuum (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Rumbaut, 2008; Yanow, 2002). This expansion is particularly salient for considering the colonial legacy of racialization of Latinx individuals and amplified given the heterogeneous identities that comprise the Latinx community.

The evolution of the term Hispanic, a constructed panethnic identity, threaded together individuals primarily by a common linguistic background – supporting the counting and categorizing of a diverse group of individuals (Cobas et al., 2015; Mora, 2014; Núñez, 2014). Heterogeneity within the Hispanic community is affirmed by the dissonance in self-identification; 51% of Hispanic individuals used their families' countries of origin to describe their identity (Taylor et al., 2012). In the past decade, Latinx emerged as “a term for people who do not identify along the European settler-colonial gender binary and inclusive for all people of Latin American origin and descent” (Salinas, 2020, p. 161). Latinx racial identity can be further understood through the framing of street race, the intersection of ascribed race - how people identify you - and self-identified race. Constructed to problematize the dissonance regarding Latinx racial identity, the work of Lopez and colleagues (2017) pushes against the ways race has been incorrectly conflated with ethnicity obscuring how physical appearances are used to categorize people. In complicating characterization of racial identity within definitions of Latinidad speaks to the erasure of Afro-Latinx and other racial identities (Logan, 2009). Despite its limitations, *Hispanic* continues to be utilized within higher education policy making, including how HSIs garner this designation. Complicating its engagement informs a framing for how institutions advance racial equity.

Evolution of Racial Diversity and Higher Education

Diversity discourse has come to permeate higher education but is increasingly distanced from conversations about racial equity (Felix & Ramirez, 2020; Jayakumar et al., 2018). These shifts have captured how “the term 'diversity' is used in multiple contexts serving myriad functions” (Harris et al., 2015, p. 24). Narratives considering Latinx students have taken up a discourse of “browning,” which serves to distance Latinidad from Blackness (Busey & Silva, 2020), informed by the political tax associated with explicitly racialized discourse. Capturing how racial policy discourse draws a largely negative response shaped by White individuals perceptions that discussions of race run counter to egalitarian values (Huber & Lapinski, 2006; Mendelberg, 2017).

Racial capitalism adds to this framing by articulating the ways that predominantly White institutions engage nonwhiteness as a desirable commodity (Leong, 2013; Ray, 2019). Thus, while advancing racial diversity benefits institutions and the students they serve, it is often done in ways that fail to reflect a deep engagement (Leong, 2013). Examples of racial capitalism include institutions utilizing images of racially diverse students to present an overrepresentation of racial diversity at the institution (Durhams, 2000; Pippert et al., 2013). As such, racial capitalism alongside the political implications of racial equity policies provides a lens to consider higher education DEI policy.

Institutional DEI plans offer a site of exploration surrounding organizational discourse, serving as a principal mechanism for illustrating "an institution-wide commitment to enhancing diversity" (Green, 1989, p. 7; Iverson, 2008). A range of documents – DEI strategic plans, policies, and reports – are produced in response to institutional decision-making and state-level policy mandates. Existing research examining DEI plans at land-grant institutions and within California community colleges characterizes how these institution-level plans advance color evasive language, present a deficit framework around students, and include a significant level of heterogeneity (Ching et al., 2018; Felix & Castro, 2018; Iverson, 2007, 2008). Engaging CRT, Iverson (2007) illustrates how diversity plans perpetuate exclusionary practices on campuses, positioning students of color as disadvantaged to reinforce inequality. Among California community colleges' DEI plans, the language has become increasingly vague over time, capturing a decentering of focus surrounding racially minoritized students (Ching et al., 2018). DEI plans at HSIs, produce a disconnect between stated inequitable outcomes for Latinx students (characterized by metrics such as lower enrollment or graduation), specific goals to counter this inequity, and decenter the consideration of intersectional Latinx students (Felix et al., 2018; Casellas Connors, 2021). Thus, at the intersection of these two bodies of literature – histories of racialization in the U.S. alongside institution-level DEI plans – this research attends to a gap regarding how state-level DEI policies impact two and four-year HSIs.

CRT and LatCrit in Higher Education

Critical scholarship provides a framework through which questions of racial equity in higher education can be considered. Over the past decade, what began as a sparse engagement with CRT (Harper et al., 2009) has shifted to a deeper engagement across policy, student affairs, and organizational decision-making (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Patton, 2016). Within higher education policy, CRT has framed work looking at state policy discourse related to the Texas Top 10% plan, equity-minded transfer policies, and access for Black students (Chase, 2016; Harper, 2009; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2014). Exploring how policy has been used to advance race-neutral proxies, such as test score or socioeconomic status, as a mechanism to avoid directly engaging in question of race. More broadly, this research finds the dominance of the advancement of color evasive discourse and practice capturing the erasure of racially minoritized identities within racial equity policies (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Mertes, 2013; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2014; Yosso et al., 2004).

Seeking to complement CRT, LatCrit considers the racialized existence of Latinx students, threading together conversations of race, whiteness, and the construction of Latinidad. LatCrit has advanced a consideration of the lack of racial equity policy in public school finance (Aleman, 2008), the consideration of how Latinx students serve as critical sources for the (co)construction of knowledge (Bernal, 2002), and education pathways for Latinx students in community colleges (Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012). LatCrit research has been augmented with work contesting the erasure of Afro-Latinx students and the erasure of Latinx students, engaging counternarrative or color neutral racism to capture how students don't feel Latino enough, including the authenticity of one's Latinidad was often called into question (Haywood, 2017) and how Latinx students experience Afro-Latinx microaggressions and thus reject Blackness (García-Louis & Cortes, 2020). As such, CRT and LatCrit frame how diversity discourse obscures racism and histories of exclusion in favor of incrementalism and the normalization of racism, thus moving the analysis beyond a focus on individual action to one of systemic behavior (Harper, 2009; Solorzano, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

Critical Race Theoretical Framework

Diversity policy, and the resulting discourse, has often been engaged to advance a race-neutral set of programs and goals (Felix & Trinidad, 2020; Jayakumar et al., 2018); critical scholarship can serve to center inquiry around racial equity and economic oppression (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, 2015; Museus et al., 2015). Consequently, this work engages the framework and tenets conceptualized in CRT and LatCrit. Drawing from the critiques of legal scholars who saw the legal landscape failing to advance racial and economic liberation, CRT foregrounds power relationships to capture the importance of race, typically along a Black-white binary (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Taylor et al., 2009). Focusing on Latinxs, LatCrit positions the significant heterogeneity within the Latinx community regarding race and racism (Nunez, 1999). LatCrit captures histories of Latinx oppression, rooted in an understanding of poverty, immigration, discrimination, and exclusion (Bernal, 2002; Espinoza & Harris, 1998; Villalpando, 2003); maintaining an attentiveness to “intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 312). As such, CRT and LatCrit together focus on the complex identities and experiences of the Latinx community – addressing inequities produced through higher education legal and policy structures.

As dynamic frameworks, a single set of themes may not capture the rich conceptualization of CRT and LatCrit. Instead, these temporal frameworks require customization and critical reflection – enabling their engagement across different scholarly disciplines. Balancing the need for specificity and generality, Villalpando (2003) distills five elements that fuse CRT and LatCrit, summarized below.

Centrality of Race and Racism: Racism is not isolated or random but a regular systemic component of life in the U.S. (Harper, 2009; Solorzano, 1998). Complemented by intersectionality how – multiple historically oppressed identities operate alongside race. Reinforcing and amplifying the dynamics of exclusion, this theme draws attention to the similarities and differences within the Latinx community that may (re)produce inequity (Crenshaw, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Valdez, 2013).

Challenging the Dominant Ideology: Critiquing how the concepts of meritocracy, color neutrality, and race-neutrality perpetuate misconceptions regarding racial fairness, this theme decenters the ways racism manifests (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Coupled with the framing of whiteness as property – how the protection of whiteness advances the continued subjugations of racially minoritized identities – to contribute a prevailing construction of race (Harris, 1993).

Commitment to Social Justice and Praxis: Efforts to advance scholarship and practice aimed at eliminating racism and oppression are central to LatCrit (Villalpando, 2003). Layered with interest convergence, the theme illuminates how the interests of people of color's are advanced or pursued when they benefit those in the majority (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Centrality of Experiential Knowledge: The lived experiences of people of color are often attacked, decentered, and delegitimized (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This theoretical frame positions counter storytelling and counternarratives as a valid and critical element of interrogating Latinx lives.

Historical Context and Interdisciplinary Perspective: LatCrit draws from historical contexts regarding desires to render Latinx raceless (Lopez, 1997), drawing attention to the legal foundations which advance this raceless claim. In doing so, this work pulls from a myriad of theoretical and conceptual framings to advance both intra and inter Latinx group coalitions (Villalpondo, 2003; Yosso et al., 2001).

Placing these frameworks alongside each other amplifies their complementary elements to “produce research in which CRT would serve as a tool and framework to unsettle racelessness in education” (Patton, 2016, p. 316) while advancing inquiry that explicitly addresses Latinx student equity. The engagement with LatCrit advances the ability to “see the complexity of race [which] lead to a failure to understand racism. LatCrit, an extension of CRT, endeavors to transform our understanding of race” (Espinoza & Harris, 1998, p. 507).

Framing the Study

Situating the Florida Sociopolitical and Policy Context

One of the most diverse states in the U.S., racial equity in Florida higher education is situated in the state's broader racial and educational landscape. Currently, 26% of Floridians or 5.7 million people identify as Hispanic or Latinx – clustered around 20 counties that report 20% of their community as Latinx (Bureau of Economic and Business Research, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Complicating the essentialization of the Latinx identity in Florida, Haywood (2017) speaks to ethnic identity. Drawing on data indicating that Cuban Americans were twice as likely to vote Republican than non-Cuban Latinos, Haywood (2017) captures how anti-Blackness and internalized racism shape Latinx voters and, thus, the broader Florida political context.

Considering education in Florida, the average age among the Latinx community is 36, and Latinx young people make up 32% of the K-12 education – nearly half a million students annually (Excelencia, 2021). These students are clustered around 19 Hispanic Serving School Districts-school districts with at least 25% Hispanic enrollment (HACU, 2019). Within higher education, among Latinxs age 18-34, 23% were enrolled in higher education compared to 44% of white non-Hispanics (Excelencia, 2021). Among the 40 public higher education institutions who enroll approximately 700,000 students annually, approximately 28% of students are Latinx (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The 10 HSIs in the system educate nearly 40% of all students, and 65% of Latinx students are enrolled in these public institutions. Less discussed is the vital role these HSIs play in educating Black students – 50% of Black students were enrolled at a HSIs (Florida Board of Education, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). These data serve to paint a picture of the geographic and educational diversity of the Latinx community and the role that HSIs play in educating racially minoritized students in Florida.

Equity Reports, the focus of this research, are framed by the policy landscape in which they are produced. The primary policy guiding the production of the Equity Reports, the Florida Educational Equity Act (FEEA), seeks to protect equitable access and engagement in education across the K-20 system. Established in 1984, FEEA was an element of Florida's legislative response to *Adams v. Richardson* (Bender & Blanco, 1987), which required states to equalize education. FEEA notes that “discrimination regarding race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, disability, religion, or marital status against a student or an employee in the state system of public K-20 education is prohibited” (Title XLVIII K-20 Education Code, 2019), and outlines the policy implementation requirements noting reporting frequency, themes, and accountability. Among Florida State Universities, the Florida Board of Governors Regulation- Equity and Access regulation mandates

the production of such equity documents. While the Florida College System relies exclusively on the FEAA and the Institution Employment Equity Accountability Program, which tasks those institutions to consider employment practices – notably addressing employment inequity by race and gender, with particular attention to STEM areas – as a secondary policy. Despite the various policy jurisdictions, all public institutions produce an Equity Report in response to the policy. The Florida College System provides policy implementation guidance to produce a single report complying with the FEAA and Employment Equity Accountability policies. Alternatively, the State University System reporting guidelines focus on the Florida Board of Governors Regulation- Equity and Access regulation and employment equity accountability act. These two policies have differentiated implementation implications for traditionally two-year (FCS) and four-year (FSU) institutions.

Data Sources

Qualitative research brings to the forefront engagement with questions of “understanding the social world” (Rossman & Rallis, 2016, p. 8). It is thus valuable for building an understanding of experience or phenomena. As a critical discourse study, this project seeks to understand the meanings, overt and hidden, found in institutional texts. To do so, it draws on data from a larger study considering diversity plans across California, Florida, and New York – states with DEI policy requirements. The sample for this analysis includes 10 public HSIs in Florida, 2 four-year institutions, and 8 two-year institutions, that range in size from 1,000 to 40,000 students, with 39% to 83% of students identified as racially minoritized – specifically, 25% to 69% of students are Latinx (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). Across their urban and rural locations, these HSIs are central to the education of Latinxs and other racially minoritized students in Florida.

The three-prong data collection process (see Table 1) began with the identification of an institution’s Equity Report, which is publicly available documents found on institutional websites or accessed through the Florida State College Board or Florida Governing Board. While the Equity Reports were the primary data sources, a secondary set of data was gathered from institutional websites. The researcher conducted keyword searches – diversity, equity, inclusion, Hispanic Serving Institution/HSI, Title V, chief diversity officer/equity officer – on each institution’s website. This yielded supplemental data included mission statements, diversity programming, diversity committee efforts, etc. Once primary themes were identified, three key informants were engaged. These interviews served to gather complementary data regarding HSIs and DEI policy implementation – including the utilization of the policy implementation process and informants’ insights on preliminary findings.

Table 1 <i>Data Sample and Sources</i>	
Component	Description
Sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Florida Public HSI Institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2 State University (4-year institutions) ○ 8 State Colleges (2 and 4-year institutions)
Data Source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Institutional Equity Reports (10 plans, 320 pages) ● Institutional materials- gathered via institutional website (281 documents, 1,247 pages) ● Key informant interviews (3 interviews, 45-60 min per interview)

Methods & Analysis

Methodologically, the study expands on the work of Briscoe and Khalifa (2015) and Busey (2017), who thread together CRT alongside critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2005; Gee, 2004) to construct critical race discourse analysis (CRDA). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) captures the interrelationship among networks of power considering how written text and symbols are informed by social practice, the broader political context, and discursive practice – considering the production, distribution, and intended consumption of texts (Fairclough, 2005; Martínez-Alemán, 2015). As noted by Gee (2004), discourse analysis “is also a distinctive way of using various symbols, images, objects, artifacts, tools, technologies, times, places, and spaces” (p. 46). Attention to questions of power supports CDAs' focus on oppressed groups, supports the goal of foregrounding inequality (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Further, it does not intend to claim neutrality but instead acknowledges the political positionality of scholarship - “that is, CDA is biased- and proud of it” (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak, 2001). While CDA does not explicitly consider race, it is focused on those who are excluded, and thus, it has been used to consider racialized discourse. CRT and LatCrit position the centrality of race, critiques of color neutrality and whiteness, and interest convergence to foreground the racialized nature of higher education state and institutional policy. Three themes, the centrality of race, challenging dominant ideology, and social justice praxis, are most salient for this analysis. Table 2 provides an example of how the equity plans were reviewed to center these critical frameworks.

Table 2

Aligning CRT, LatCrit, and Discourse Analysis

	CRT	LatCrit	Discourse Analysis Considerations
The Centrality of Race and Racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● race and racism as central ● advancing anti-essentialism that foregrounds intersectionality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● acknowledges convergent and divergent experiences that make up the Latinx community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consideration or presentation of racial inequity
Challenge to the Dominant Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● push against claims of objectivity, meritocracy, and color neutrality ● whiteness as property 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● legal scholarship is seen as political 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The opportunity of people of color or lack of overt mention of race ● Characterization of the intersection of marginalized identities ● Centering or decentering of whiteness

	CRT	LatCrit	Discourse Analysis Considerations
Commitment to Social Justice and Praxis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● interest convergence ● valuing and prioritizing efforts that combat racism and oppression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● LatCrit as a tool for scholars-activism ● requires self-reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy positioned as supporting white economic interest ● Characterizations of equity or equality ● Social justice issues most salient in the Latinx community

Source: Adapted from Casellas Connors (2021).

CRDA foregrounds CRT and LatCrit in the discourse analysis. Following the framing presented by McGregor (2003) and Wodak and Myer (2015), analysis was undertaken to consider terms, phrases, and other descriptive elements addressing the rhetoric of racial diversity within the Florida Equity Reports. To operationalize the leveraged discursive techniques – components that may have multiple or hidden meanings – a final round of coding sought to identify any of the eight discursive techniques articulated by Ana Martínez-Alemán (2015). These techniques, including tone, omissions, register, etc., allow for examining the text's hidden meanings (Martínez-Alemán, 2015).

Guided by the process above, first, an analytic memo for each institution was drafted to serve as a summary of the supplemental (website) data. These memos captured themes within these documents. Second, in Nvivo, the Equity Reports were coded using a multi-phase line-by-line coding approach. This included considering policy frameworks (policy problems and policy solutions), descriptive codes (Latinx, race, community, etc.), and the CDA techniques (tone, insinuation, register, etc.). Finally, a second memo, a comparison of the supplemental materials and the coded Equity Report, was produced to support the organization of the data and comparison across the multiple data sources. The initial themes centered on programmatic interventions- access and success strategies, characterizations of racially minoritized students, faculty and staff training, workforce goals focused on employment equity, and community partnerships. These preliminary themes served as a framing for the interview. The data from the interviews was placed alongside the coded data to frame the final themes.

Findings

The Florida Equity Reports, situated within the landscape of legislative policy and state-system implementation guidance, serve to frame racial equity at these public institutions. Specifically, by engaging CRDA, the analysis interrogates the discursive strategies that institutions engage in advancing narratives of racial equity. First, the findings capture the discursive decentering of racial equity capturing the similarities and differences between two-year and four-year institutions. Second, the Equity Report discourse leads to an assortment of structural and programmatic interventions, many of which do not center on racial equity. Finally, how these institutions center Latinx students drawing in to view the (dis)engagement with the HSI designation. By viewing these data through the lenses of CRDA, this work reckons with the utilization of Florida Equity Reports and their potential to serve as sites for advancing racial equity.

Race-Neutrality Frames Racial Equity

Despite the central role of diversity within higher education discourse, how it is defined and engaged remains nebulous (Ahmed, 2012). Across these data, the state-level framing of diversity supports the situating of racial equity; this institutional discourse positions race alongside other elements of diversity, constructing an often race-neutral descriptions. Specifically, social practice, the broader socio-political landscape, foregrounds how the FEEA focuses on discrimination related to race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, disability, religion, or marital status. Considering the policy within the national landscape, a legislative policy in response to the *Adams vs. Richardson* (Bender & Blanco, 1987) captures how this policy aligns with a national dialogue in response to educational equity and the legal landscape of race in higher education (Jayakumar et al., 2018). Further, the policy serves to present the discursive practices surrounding the production of the reports characterizing the role of boards of trustees in the determination of data and compliance.

Each of the state systems, the Florida State College System (FCS) and the State University System (SUS), further shape the institutional discourse through their implementation guidance. The FSC notes their role in calculating and disseminating data for the Equity Reports – “the FCS provides formulas in excel formats that eliminate the need for manual calculation of accomplishments” providing one view of implementation. Alternatively, the implementation guidance from the SUS Board of Governors highlights, “The data focuses on women and members of specified race/ethnic protected classes or underrepresented minority groups.” Thus, across two-year and four-year institutions, the implementation data serves as a pivotal site for determining how racial equity is characterized by institutions. The policy implementation guidance shapes who may be considered; yet less attention is given to the exact data drawn to make that case.

The lens of dominant ideology, and a focus on how discourse may center people of color, illustrates how this DEI plan discourse is not neutral. Instead, the FCS implementation guidance presents only four racial identities – Black, Hispanic, White, and other – it uses tools of power relations, depictions of both the powerful and powerless (Martínez-Alemán, 2015); rendering some identities invisible and others as powerful. In the process, they are effectively erasing Asian, Native American, Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander, and Multiracial by consolidating these individuals under a single header- other. Among the SUS institutions, the guidance notes the 2010 establishment of national norms to guide the categorization of race – “Beginning with Summer 2010, Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) terminology for these classes was used for reporting. The classes are: Black or African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Two or More Races.” As such, the 4-year institutions engage in a potentially richer conversation regarding racial equity by considering the nuances across racial groups. Rhetorical tools of insinuation present particular racial identities as meriting consideration, thus positioning who has power within policy-making and implementation. At the institution-level authors discursively engage the technique of tone, utilizing terms and words that assert a sense of authority (Martínez-Alemán, 2015), asserting the state data is final and without space for interrogation or reflection.

Locating Racial Equity in Equity Report Programming

The characterizations of racial equity in the legislative framing and state-system guidance gives way to increasingly race-neutral programmatic or systemic interventions. Institutions produce definitions of diversity that either leave diversity undefined or enumerate a host of social identities. The all-encompassing framing of diversity, affirmed through key stakeholder interviews, where a participant suggested, “when we discuss this, we are referring to everyone. We are referring to everyone based on you know races, ethnicity, national origin, gender, marital status, all of those key

areas" has significant implications for the program interventions that institutions position as advancing equity. Across these data, program interventions can be understood through the ways in which the center or decenter racial equity. Interrogating the institutional discourse captures a spectrum of racial equity discourse in which institutional programming can be located – programming decoupled from racial equity, programmatic discourse that engages racial equity proxies, and discourse that foregrounding racial equity.

Decoupled from Racial Equity

A significant component of programming that institutions identify does not present a clear link to advancing equity for any historically oppressed identity. Institutional discourse decoupled from racial equity is thus centered on broad programming such as “Established Academic Success Centers (ASC) and Peer Tutoring on all campuses to increase the support needed for course completion. Usage is tracked through Accutrack Software and reported each term” and “The college has developed Guided Program Schedules (GPS) for the most in-demand A.A. degree tracks into the state university system and state colleges.” These institutional processes and programs are not explicitly identified as supporting racial equity. Alternatively, institutions positioned their general recruitment efforts as advancing equity. For example, “New student recruitment initiatives continued to include an aggressive schedule of college fairs, high school visits, classroom presentations, and school counselor outreach within and outside the college's five-county service area.” The discourse suggests action, increasing outreaching, but does little to target racial equity. Instead, these Equity Reports reflect programming that advances all students, with no clear focus on systemic inequities. Through techniques like topicalization, which produce a perspective or slant, the disproportion focus away from racially minoritized students rhetorically positions all work as diversity work (Martínez-Alemán, 2015).

Engaging Racial Equity Proxies

Alternatively, institutions center the framing of racial equity through the engagement of proxies – disadvantages, at-risk, low-income – or other discourse that shifts a discursive gaze away from explicit racial equity while still yielding the benefits of racial capitalism (Leong, 2013; Martínez-Alemán, 2015). One institution speaks to this by noting, “Continued partnerships with non-profit and community agencies such as Boys and Girls Club, Goodwill Industries, YMCAs, local youth centers, and other targeted organizations.” The rhetorical use of insinuation positions the YMCA as a site for outreach that addresses racial equity without speaking to the racially minoritized students that this organization may serve.

Foregrounding Racial Equity

Finally, a smaller set of programmatic interventions articulate a focus on racially minoritized populations. Programs such as, “Minority male Initiative, an annual program that brings Black and Hispanic Students to campus, began in 2016 with over 100 students” or “The [college] Program, founded as a pilot program during the 2009–11 academic years, is a cohort program to connect Black and Hispanic male students with faculty mentors and scholarships” produce a discourse that centers Black and Latinx students. By explicitly identifying the populations served, institutions map how these programs are attending to racial equity. However, tracing the discourse of racial equity across the 10 institutions captures how institutions produce an overwhelmingly race-neutral set of programs.

HSI Designation Positioned Through Funding

CRDA focuses on elements of the data that go largely undiscussed, including how the said and unsaid serve to construct a narrative of Latinx students. Explicate mentions of Latinx students generally emerged in discussions of enrollment data and shifting community populations. The demographics shifts were, at times, coupled with reference to the HSI designation such as, “for Hispanic students’ FTIC enrollment, the College established a goal of 26%, in line with the definition for Hispanic Serving Institutions.” Positioning the advancement of Latinx diversity as only about shifting community demographics served as a tool of insinuation, the use of words or phrases that obscure the intended meaning, thereby removing culpability of the writer, or institution, when racial equity isn’t met. Thus, rhetorically institutions avoid a conversation about the substantive changes necessary to support racially minoritized students, and specifically what it would demand to consider serving Latinx students as the HSI designation would suggest. Through this process, the HSI designation simply becomes another award – “So being an HSI is like any other designation. I mean, we’re happy to have the designation, but we know that it still means that we are responsible for all students yet, and still, we are smart enough to know that there’s a need for organizational structures.”

As a result, the discourse across these documents constructs institutional efforts supporting Latinx students primarily shaped by the institutional programming resulting from the Title V funding. Drawing from the tenet of a commitment to social justice and praxis situate the way that white economic interest may be centered; Title V funding may not explicitly center Latinx students (Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2018). Institutions that discuss the HSI STEM grant programming articulated how it was targeted to support all students or focused on Latinx students. In framing these programs, institutions foreground the funding source, with little attention to how that funding may support Latinx students. For example, efforts such as, “Through the HSI STEM grant, early alert software has been purchased and is being installed to permit faculty and staff to report at-risk students so that intervention strategies can be applied to assist these students with retention, success, and completion goals” do little to articulate serving Latinx students. Alternatively, “Strengthening Academic Advising and Transfer is a 2.6-million-dollar Hispanic-Serving Institution Title V Federal grant, whose goal is to create a collaborative infrastructure to support students’ successful graduation and transfer over five years” also speaks to the decentering of Latinx students within the Equity Reports. The discursive strategy of tone, specific words to imply certainty, present these ongoing programs as fulfilling their obligation to address equity for Latinx students. Programs that don’t center Latinx students and instead are positioned to support “all students” utilize text that is persuasive to suggesting a level of institutional advancement to support Latinx students despite the lack of intentional focus presented in the text.

Other institutions are more explicit regarding how these HSI funds will support Latinx students. For example, “With the [Title V] grant entering its second year, advances are being made to increase the number of Hispanic and low-income students who enter and complete STEM certificates and degrees.” Through this rhetoric, institutions identify how they are actively targeting support to Latinx students. However, the overwhelming silence regarding a broad support for Latinx students is pervasive across both two-year and four-year institutions. Capturing the sparse focus on Latinx students beyond the financial resources afforded through the HSI designation. Doing so perpetuates a narrative of enrolling Latinx students with less emphasis on serving them. Distinctly absent in consideration of any racialized Latinx identity that may shape how students engage with and are supported by the university.

Discussion

Across higher education, the rhetoric surrounding diversity has become socially desirable; Florida is no exception. Actors in and outside higher education advocate for the need to remedy failings, informing how institutions take up and implement equity policy. Yet, institutions may not have the tools or desire to meaningfully advance these efforts (Ahmed, 2012; Bell, 1980). In the process, Kalwant Bhopal (2018) suggests, “policy-making has failed in its attempts to champion inclusion and social justice, and in doing so, has further marginalized the position of Black and minority ethnic groups” (p. 4). Situating this analysis within the broader discursive practice, the analysis centers on the ways that the policy-making process is not neutral. Further, interrogating the complex nature of HSIs must contend with the fact that “research often decontextualizes the external political, economic, and social environments within which HSIs operate” (Garcia et al., 2019, p. 749). Framed by the policy landscape, the institutional discourse within the Equity Reports provides a lens to critically examine whether these institutional documents advance racial justice or perpetuate systemic oppression.

The programmatic efforts presented in the Equity Reports capture how dominant ideologies around color and race-neutrality permeate the discourse. In the process, overt discussions of racially minoritized students are replaced with or placed alongside proxies, such as “Particular emphasis is placed on recruiting minority and non-traditional students, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds,” to discuss race. Dovetailing with prior findings (Bhopal, 2018; Casellas Connors, 2021; Ching et al., 2018; Felix & Castro, 2018), this work expands the research regarding the institutional reproduction of state-level discourse that evades centering racial equity. Specifically, these findings advance prior scholarship that considers the race-neutrality of state policy to extend the consideration of the intersection between state-level policy and implementation guidelines (Bensimon & Dowd, 2015; Sulé et al., 2017). In the process, these data capture how reports paint a picture of how institutions center or decenter racially minoritized students. Discursively, through the strategies of topicalization, the mechanisms for producing a perspective or slant as well as tone, utilization of specific words to imply certainty about this work, they do something more than highlight universal strategies that have been created; they perpetuate a narrative that all efforts are racial equity efforts.

Further, as other research has demonstrated, such as that on transfer (Chase et al., 2012), simply implementing programs in areas where inequities exist does not mean they will be taken up equally by racially minoritized students and non-racially minoritized students. Alternatively put, the policy implementation often fails to acknowledge that unique strategies are required to support racially minoritized students. Beyond examining how programmatic offerings construct framing of racial diversity and Latinx students, these data also illustrate how racial equity is advanced up until it threatens white interests- in this case, achieved through diversity for all rhetoric. Despite the Florida Educational Equity Policy framing supporting a focus on racial equity, the other social identities enumerated in the policy language appear to shift the focus away from racial equity. At the institution, race-neutral policy bolsters white students' needs – tutoring, advising, and other general programs- thus illustrating how racial capitalism advances the profiting from advancing discourse surrounding nonwhite students while restricting substantive change (Leong, 2013). In doing so, this illustrates how whiteness as property operates to reinforce the privileged positions that many white students bring to higher education, resulting in a tempering racial equity effort (Harris, 1993).

Finally, the analysis captures the noticeable gap in the articulation of institutional commitment and support for Latinx students, despite this institution's HSI eligibility indicating that at least 25% of their enrollment is Latinx. The scant mention of HSI funding, several of which also

perpetuate race-neutral programming, thus builds on work that has considered the prominent role of Title V in the construction of the rationale and resources for HSIs. Yet, in reviewing Title V abstracts, Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2018) identify that the vast majority, 85%, do not center Latinx students. Institutions instead, favored a color evasive approach, allocating resources towards labs or equipment that would benefit all students. In doing so, institutional programming and the resulting discourse failed to illustrate how the expended funds would explicitly support Latinx students and captures the way that proximity to whiteness, higher white enrollment increase the likelihood of obtaining Title V funds (Vargas, 2018).

Equity Reports are a venue for codifying an institutions' racial equity agenda; across these Florida HSIs institutions have the potential to foreground Latinx students. While implementation guidance shapes the different demographic data used at 2-year and 4-year institutions - the rhetoric of diversity was broadly race-neutral. Further, across both types of institutions, support for Latinx students was generally characterized as merely about access to resources. The obscuring of intentional support for Latinx students does not attend to the significant variation within the Florida Latinx community (Haywood, 2017; Mallet & Pinto-Coelho, 2018). Thus, these state policy mandated reports become a site to reproduce a narrative of limited engagement with how institutional identity may intentionally support Latinx students (Garcia, 2016). As such, these finds contribute to a larger understanding of how racial equity policy and the resulting institution-level implementation can maintain an attentiveness to racial equity or produce a race-neutral discourse that leaves HSI missions unfulfilled.

Implications for Policy & Practice

These data illustrate how policies, which have been characterized as addressing racial equity, are taken up through color evasive discourse. While these data frame the discourse presented by HSIs, the primary public higher education educator of Black and Latinx students in Florida, the findings have implications for state and institutional policy across HSIs and institutions interested in centering racially minoritized students. First, these data demonstrated how a broad construction of diversity leads to the exclusion of racial diversity or the engagement of proxies related to race. Practitioners and policy-makers must engage in a more explicate focus on racially minoritized students through the policy, implementation, and program elements to center histories of racial oppression.

Utilizing DEI plans to advance racial equity requires addressing higher education institutions' notorious silos. The Florida Equity Reports are overseen by an Equity Officer – an individual often housed in Human Resources. Elevating the power of the Equity Report begins with leveraging state policy to ensure that DEI initiatives be overseen by individuals with sufficient positional authority to use this reporting as a tool for change, in line with best practices noted by the National Association of Chief Diversity Officers (Worthington et al., 2014). Guided by strong leadership institutions can thread DEI efforts throughout all aspects of the institution - leveraging the equity reporting process as a tool to foster and facilitate conversations across many aspects of the institution to shift this towards structural change (Smith, 2020). Demanding that equity policy engages all aspects of the higher education enterprise is particularly salient for ensuring that these move from one department or unit.

Conclusion

Latinx students have a longstanding and increasingly significant role in U.S. higher education enrollment; these students are an unequivocally vital element of public higher education in Florida.

Through the case of public two-year and four-year HSIs in Florida, this research considers the interlocking discourses related to race, diversity, and Latinx students to examine how state policy and implementation guidance shape Equity Reports. The CRDA cements the need for scholarship to consider how these policies may (re)produce narratives that contribute to the tenets of both CRT and LatCrit. As these data illustrate, the current equity reporting strategies may serve a performative role within institutions' racial equity discourse. The failure to explicitly address the needs of racially minoritized groups speaks to policy's ability to obscure, temper, and fail to address racial and social justice. Instead, omnibus diversity language essentializes the nuanced experiences of the many racially minoritized identities that enroll and work at these institutions; it allows for a narrative of diversity that is the result of a political climate that both needs to center "a respectability discourse."

Furthermore, it illustrates the limited yet problematic ways that institutions engage their HSI designation. Through these findings, this research contributes to the existing but limited body of scholarship that has considered these institutional documents (Casellas Connors, 2021; Ching et al., 2018; Gordon et al., 2010) and provides the opportunity to discuss these policies' role in a new state context. Looking across traditional two-year and four-year institutions, this work explores the similarities and differences that emerge across this institutional rhetoric. In doing so, this work can be placed in conversation with an emerging higher education scholarship that considers policy implementers' role in advancing equity (Nienhuser, 2018). Future research may take up questions regarding who was engaged in this process, learning more from policy implementers. Considering differences based on duration as an HSI, the Latinx population, and other regional characteristics could help consider how racial equity discourse is distinct and a part of the broader institutional community. While diversity plans continue to be contested sites (Ahmed, 2012), they remain critical as they shape an understanding of institutions' public commitment to and accountability concerning racial equity.

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