

Proposal Summary.

Title

Money isn't Free: A Study of Influences on Grant-Seeking and Making at Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges

Abstract

Amid public divestment in higher education, grant-seeking is increasingly critical for colleges and universities, especially Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges (HSCCs). Yet, as the adage goes, money isn't free. In this study, we identify external forces that intercede within grant-seeking and -making, thus complicating HSCCs' ability to serve Latinx students.

Proposal Text

Amid public divestment in higher education, colleges and universities must search for alternative revenue streams, including philanthropic gifts, industry partnerships, patents, and grants. While dwindling public support stresses all colleges and universities, these conditions have an outsized negative impact on certain institutions, including community colleges and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). HSIs are public and private U.S. postsecondary institutions with a minimum Latinx and Pell-eligible undergraduate enrollment of 25% and 50%, respectively (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). Notably, 40% of HSIs are public community colleges (Excelencia in Education, 2023). Given the long-standing underfunding of community colleges (Cummings et al., 2021) and HSIs (Ortega et al., 2015), Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges (HSCCs) are especially susceptible to budgets cuts and attentive to diversifying their revenue through various means, including by seeking Title V grants (Aguilar-Smith, 2021). Title V grants are competitively awarded capacity-building grants for HSIs.

Although public HSCCs constitute the largest segment of the HSI population (Excelencia in Education, 2023), the HSI scholarship underemphasizes these institutions (Doran, 2023; Marin & Aguilar-Smith, 2022). Hence, HSCCs' involvement in grant-seeking and getting is not well understood. Furthermore, while studies examine the link between research grants and research productivity (e.g., Benavente et al., 2012; Chudnovsky et al., 2008; Dundar & Darrell, 1998; Gulbrandsen & Smeby, 2005), limited research explores seeking and getting institutional grants like Title V. Given the growing push for grant acquisition and that Title V grants serve as a main external funding source for many HSIs, especially HSCCs, the purpose of this study is to better understand the nature of grant-seeking and getting within the HSCC context. Specifically, our guiding research question is: How do external factors shape Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges' pursuit of Title V funding?

ABRIDGED LITERATURE REVIEW

Given this study's focus, we reviewed literature on HSCCs and scholarship on grantmaking, particularly research on Title V grants.

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Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges

As prefaced, published research expressly about HSCCs is scant. Recently, however, Doran (2023) conducted a systematic literature review of research related to HSCCs. Specifically, utilizing Garcia et al.'s (2019) multidimensional framework of servingness, she examined ways that components of servingness, like programs and services, may differ at HSCCs relative to their 4-year counterparts. Additionally, they identified unique parts of the community college mission, like career and technical education programs, which merit consideration in conversations around servingness. Although one of the first empirical analyses about HSCCs, this study did not explicitly consider Title V or other HSI-related funding.

Grantmaking and Title V Grants

The literature on grantmaking makes clear that funders rarely give money with no strings attached. Rather funding agencies award grants to advance their organizational needs and interests. Subsequently, funders generally set tight eligibility criteria, prescriptive project foci, and extensive reporting and evaluation requirements. For example, with Title V, the Department of Education (ED) establishes absolute priorities, competitive preference priorities (CPPs), and invitational priorities. Most simply, these priorities reflect objectives of interest to the ED that applicants must or should cover in the scope of their proposal. And with the growing competitiveness of Title V grants, these “priorities influence the institutional strategies of HSIs and how they conceptualize their role as an HSI for serving their Latino population” (Arroyo & Santiago, 2023, p. 7). Indeed, emergent work reveals that HSIs tailor their proposals to that year’s CPPs (Arroyo & Santiago, 2013; Aguilar-Smith, 2022).

Meanwhile, within the limited literature on Title V, a few studies have quantitatively examined the distribution of this funding (e.g., Vargas, 2018) and qualitatively analyzed HSIs’ proposed use of Title V dollars (e.g., Santiago et al., 2016; Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). Regarding the latter, Vargas and Villa-Palomino (2019) conducted a content analysis of awarded Title V proposal abstracts from 2009–2016 (n = 220), interested in how HSIs use Title V grants to serve Latinx students. Discouragingly, they found that most applicants decentered and/or deficiently described Latinx students. Collectively, most research on Title V examines this grant’s effect among/at 4-year HSIs (e.g., Espinoza & Genna, 2021; Perez, 2020) or include both 2-year and 4-year institutions in their analyses (e.g., Aguilar-Smith, 2021, 2022, Burbage & Glass, 2022; Vargas & Villa-Palomino, 2019). Consequently, although HSCCs represent a sizeable share of the applicants and beneficiaries of Title V dollars, there is still an incomplete understanding of HSCC Title V awardees and grant-seeking and getting at HSCCs, particularly related to Title V funding. In short, this study helps fill this glaring gap within the literature.

CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING

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To inform our thinking and analysis for this study, we leaned on two strands of organizational theory: resource dependency theory (RDT) and Cohen et al.'s (1972) garbage can theory. Widely applied across fields, RDT acknowledges that external factors influence organizations and that organizations seek to minimize environmental uncertainty by managing their resource dependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Seeking stability—or less dependency—organizations extract resources from their environment. In the context of continued public divestment in higher education, per RDT, colleges and universities must look externally for additional revenue streams (e.g., patents, philanthropic gifts, and extramural grants). Accordingly, RDT assumes a largely rational approach to organizational decision-making. In contrast, Cohen et al.'s (1972) garbage can theory proposes:

Organizations can be viewed for some purposes as collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work. (p. 1)

Essentially, a garbage can perspective refutes rationalist assumptions about organizational behavior, suggesting that organizations irrationally retrofit prefabricated solutions to problems. Collectively, these two theories shed light on how HSCCs may “rationally” pursue Title V funding to augment declining budgets while also proposing “irrational” projects—ones seemingly outside the scope of their missions or immediate organizational needs.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Before describing our overall research design, as critical scholars, we recognize that our positionalities inform our research (Martínez-Alemán et al., 2015). One author is a Latina-identified faculty member who works at and primarily studies HSIs. Given her professional context and personal commitments, she is interested in elevating HSI-related funding opportunities and implications for equity. The other author is an HSI graduate and a former community college instructor who studies how these institutions create conditions for Latina/o/x student success, including through grant-funded projects.

Regarding our study design, we conducted a systematic content analysis of Title V recipients' proposal abstracts. Encompassing multiple steps to collect and analyze secondary data, systemic content analyses reduce selection bias and enable scholars to synthesize and assess a corpus of data (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Specifically, content analyses adhere to the following steps: unitizing, sampling, recording/coding, reducing data, inferring, and narrating (Krippendorff, 2004). We briefly discuss our approach to each of these steps below.

Data Selection Collection

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Per Krippendorff (2004), first, scholars “unitize” or define what they intend to observe and analyze. Again, we analyzed Title V recipients’ proposal abstracts from 2009-2021. Shifting to the sampling stage, we narrowed our analysis to HSCCs’ proposal abstracts for individual and cooperative Title V Part A grants during this period (HSCCs are ineligible for Title V Part B funding). For clarification, we included a proposal in our dataset if the HSCC was the primary applicant or partner institution (in the case of a cooperative grant). With these sampling parameters established, we downloaded the abstracts from the ED’s HSI Division website, ultimately collecting 400 proposal abstracts for analysis.

To facilitate further analysis, we also collected the funding opportunity notices for the Title V Part A Program published in The Federal Register. These notices include key information like the ED’s funding priorities for that cycle and the expected number of awards.

Data Analysis and Reliability

Moving into the recording/coding steps, we cataloged attributes of each proposal in Excel, including (a) year of award; (b) type of award (individual or cooperative); (c) name of the lead institution, (d) name of the partner institution(s), if applicable; (e) state location; and (f) requested dollar amount. Then, we began carefully reading and inferring the proposals and summarizing their (a) key activities; (b) expected objectives/outcomes; (c) foci (e.g., professional development, online education, transfer, etc.), and (d) alignment with that year’s CPPs. Specifically, we both coded 2009–2015 proposals and then convened to check for agreement. Then, realizing our analyses tightly aligned, we dived up the remaining proposals for analysis. As part of this process, we also noted our observations and thoughts on each proposal. These notes, in addition to our analytic memos, helped round our budding interpretations of the data and curtail reliability issues.

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We identified three major themes based on our analysis of more than a decade-worth of Title V proposal abstracts and conceptual grounding.

Changed/ing Environmental Conditions and Norms

In reviewing HSCCs’ Title V proposals awarded over a 13-year period, we observed that abstracts reflect external circumstances, with many applicants’ foregrounding changing student demographics as well as community and industry needs. Additionally, in line Santiago et al.’s (2016) report, applicants consistently proposed using Title V funding for faculty professional development and curricular innovation. However, a closer read of the proposals revealed that broad changes in higher education, specifically changes in “accepted” practices, influence grant-seeking and -making. More

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specifically, over time, we identified an influx of proposals related to data-driven decision-making and, relatedly, forms of student tracking; the integration of educational technologies; and Guided Pathways.

Involved Intermediaries

In brief, we also found that intermediary organizations, such as What Works Clearinghouse and Excelencia in Education, influence HSIs' Title V proposals, with multiple recipients explicitly evoking these organizations. Specifically, they cited these entities and their supported "best practices" to legitimize their proposed activities. We also found that research(ers) represent(s) a type of intermediary. In particular, post 2019, several proposals leaned on Garcia et al.'s (2019) notion of servingness, situating their projects as ways to become or better be "Hispanic-Serving."

Prescribed Solutions

Our analysis revealed that applicants' consistently aligned their proposals with that year's CPPs. For instance, corresponding with 2022's CPPs, many proposals emphasize students' holistic wellness, including their mental health and sense of belonging. Similarly, in 2020, we saw an increased focus on experiential and work-based learning, which again aligns with that year's CPPs. As a final example, while only about four proposals before 2019 included a financial literacy component, once the ED set that as a CCP, most applicants proposed projects with such a focus. For instance, Del Mar College stated it planned to "build a culture of financial literacy" with this funding.

ABRIDGED DISCUSSION & STUDY SIGNIFICANCE

Principally, in line with RDT, our findings show that external forces, including intermediaries, bear down on HSCCs. Moreover, grappling within a resource-constrained environment, HSCCs frame their proposals in ways that bolster their likelihood of securing said funding. In this way, our findings uphold a rational understanding of organizational behavior. At the same time, our analysis suggests that HSCCs tend to propose projects tightly aligned with the ED's CPPs, which can be understood as prescribed, one-size-fits-all solutions— or as solutions in search of problems. Consequently, in line with a garbage can perspective, some HSIs pitch projects seemingly incongruent with sincere organizational problems/priorities. Of concern, this approach to grant-seeking risks undermining institutional buy-in and the sustainability and institutionalization of Title V-funded work. Altogether, our analysis underlines the problematic nature of government-issued priorities, especially in the context of the institutionally heterogeneous HSI population. It also beckons the question: what would HSCCs request money for in the absence of CPPs?

To conclude, while recognizing that abstracts only present a snapshot of a proposed project, this study helps illuminate ways external forces influence grant seeking and

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making and reveal HSIs' arguably constrained use Title V funding given field norms and CPPs. Ultimately, in line with ASHE's 2023 theme, this study focuses on external conditions, including political forces, that intercede within grant-seeking and -making, which may complicate HSCCs' ability to serve Latinx students and, thus, undermine Title V's aims.

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