

# Interrogating Academic Probation, Dismissal, and Reinstatement Policies at a UC HSRI



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## Author Bio



**Dr. Alicia Bencomo Garcia** is a tenure-track instructor of Ethnic Studies at Cabrillo Community College. She earned her Ph.D. in education at the University of California, Davis. She is a proud daughter of immigrant, farm-working parents from Mexico. She is a product of a HSI, San Jose State University, where she earned her MA degree in Chicana/Chicano Studies. Her research focuses on the impacts of academic policies on Latinx student experiences, outcomes, and structures of servingness at HSIs.



## Introduction

Empirical research on student retention at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) has generally focused on the individual characteristics of students with minimal attention placed on the role organizational structures play in response to student's academic needs (Cuellar, 2019; Núñez & Bowers, 2012). Although some scholars have recently moved towards organizational level analyses within HSI research, the influence of institutional structures and policies on Latinx students' experiences with academic probation, dismissal and reinstatement remain underexplored (Berger, 2001; Chesler et al., 2005). Understanding organizational structures at HSIs that are intended to support Latinx students who experience academic challenges such as probation, dismissal, and reinstatement will provide a better understanding on how to best serve and

retain all Latinx students through graduation. As such, this research brief broadens the scope of existing scholarship on Latinx student retention by sharing research on how the organizational structures and campus-based efforts at a University of California (UC) HSI "serve" Latinx students during instances of academic probation, dismissal, and reinstatement. In particular, I highlight findings that document the academic support services and structures at one UC HSI that demonstrate how administration, academic policies, and Title V grants can enact servingness for Latinx students, specifically those who are encountering academic probation, dismissal, or reinstatement. As the UC system seeks to define and operationalize what it means to be an HSI system and what it means to *serve*, it is critical to interrogate the policies and structures that impede or contribute to Latinx student retention and success.

## Conceptual Framing

The study presented in this brief aimed to understand the relationship between HSI grants and services intended to support Latinx students through academic probation, dismissal and reinstatement. Specifically, the study drew from Garcia and colleagues (2019) Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness in HSI because of its usefulness in examining organizational culture and structures for servingness. The structures for “serving” that were analyzed in this study were:

- Institutional services and support programs created through Title V grants
- Institutional partnerships (e.g. Latinx cultural center and academic advising which may incorporate cultural relevance to different services)
- Policies and processes including academic probation, dismissal and reinstatement
- HSI grants and the possibilities they come with to serve Latinx students.

These are critical organizational structures that in one way or another, all impact the trajectories of students who are facing probation, dismissal, or reinstatement. Although institutional policies are not included in Garcia and colleagues (2019) framework, this research emphasizes the importance of centering academic policies surrounding probation, dismissal and reinstatement when serving Latinx students.

## Research Questions and Methods

This brief contributes to the literature on Latinx student retention within HSIs by documenting how the organizational structures and campus-based efforts at a Hispanic Serving Research Institution<sup>1</sup> (HSRI) serve Latinx students through academic challenges including academic probation, dismissal and reinstatement in their persistence to graduation. For these reasons, the following research question guided the study: How do institutional factors shape academic policy processes and support structures for students facing academic challenges (e.g., academic probation, dismissal, and reinstatement) at a UC HSI?

To answer this question, I deployed a case study methodology that included a document analysis and interviews with campus faculty, staff, and administrators. The focal UC HSI campus, Sunny University (pseudonym) was chosen as it had established services aimed to support students through academic probation, dismissal, and reinstatement. Sunny University (SU) had also developed HSI initiatives designed to provide academic support to Latinx students.

## Research Findings

This brief highlights three overarching findings that can inform higher education practice, policies, and future research on UC HSIs and R1 HSIs, more broadly. Specifically, I propose that in “serving” Latinx students academically at the UC (and beyond), the field should pay close attention to the role of 1) inequitable and inconsistent organizational structures in impeding student success, 2) the role of HSI federal funds on providing support structures and 3) how campus leadership may impede and/or contribute to the success of Latinx students. As HSIs develop an understanding and enacting of servingness, there needs to be close attention paid to the structures that impact the experiences of students who are encountering academic challenges. Servingness should not only be limited to students who are excelling academically. Likewise, there is a critical and urgent need to develop a targeted focus on how organizational structures are impeding all students from becoming academically successful rather than solely placing the onus on individual students.

### *Inequitable and Inconsistent Organizational Structures*

The first finding emphasized the lack of uniformity in academic and financial aid policies with regards to addressing student needs. This lack of student-centeredness further complicated an already confusing and difficult process as students pursued good academic standing. For instance, faculty, staff, and administrators described how academic and financial aid policies at SU functioned as inequitable and inconsistent organizational structures. The study found that institutional policies surrounding student status such as 1) academic probation, 2) subject to academic disqualification, 3) readmission, and 4) financial aid academic progress, all lacked uniformity. As students sought out ways to maintain good academic standing, they were met with various rules, approaches, and policies that created additional barriers.

<sup>1</sup> HSRI are Hispanic Serving Institutions that are also considered Research 1 institutions. Research 1 (R1s) institutions are research intensive universities. (Marin, 2019)

### ***HSI Federal Funds Act as Catalysts for Creating Structures of Servingness***

The second finding showed that HSI federal grants were essential to removing some of the institutional barriers faced by students experiencing academic challenges. Funding made possible by federal grants supported the creation of campus programs such as the Walking the Stage Program (pseudonym) which advocated for students, provided them with resources as they experienced academic challenges, and streamlined processes for them. Thus, the WSP is a structure of “serving” within the institution that successfully assists students through academic challenges. Title V grants made it possible for the institution to create services on campus whose purpose is to eliminate institutional barriers that negatively impact student outcomes. In other words, these Title V grants served as a catalyst in creating structures of servingness— such as with programs like WSP—within the university especially for those facing academic challenges.

### ***Academic Support Structures: The Impact of Campus Leadership***

Lastly, while the resources from HSI seed money had the potential to create long-lasting structural changes needed to support students, their institutionalization was dependent on campus leadership and continued financial support. Findings showed that grant initiated programs rely on campus funding and support to continue serving students. Moreover, institutional financial support after a grant’s term, shaped the structural resources that were available for students facing academic challenges. Many participants of the study raised concerns on the importance of the university financially committing to these efforts. For example, a professor shared that as a member of the HSI Leadership team, “the meetings are designed to leverage more institutional support so that we’re not just relying on grant funds.” To that end, the support of administration and campus leadership was critical for the continuation of programs such as the WSP. Without the institutionalization of funds, there is a risk of these critical support structures and systems ceasing to exist for students who are of most need.

### **Discussion**

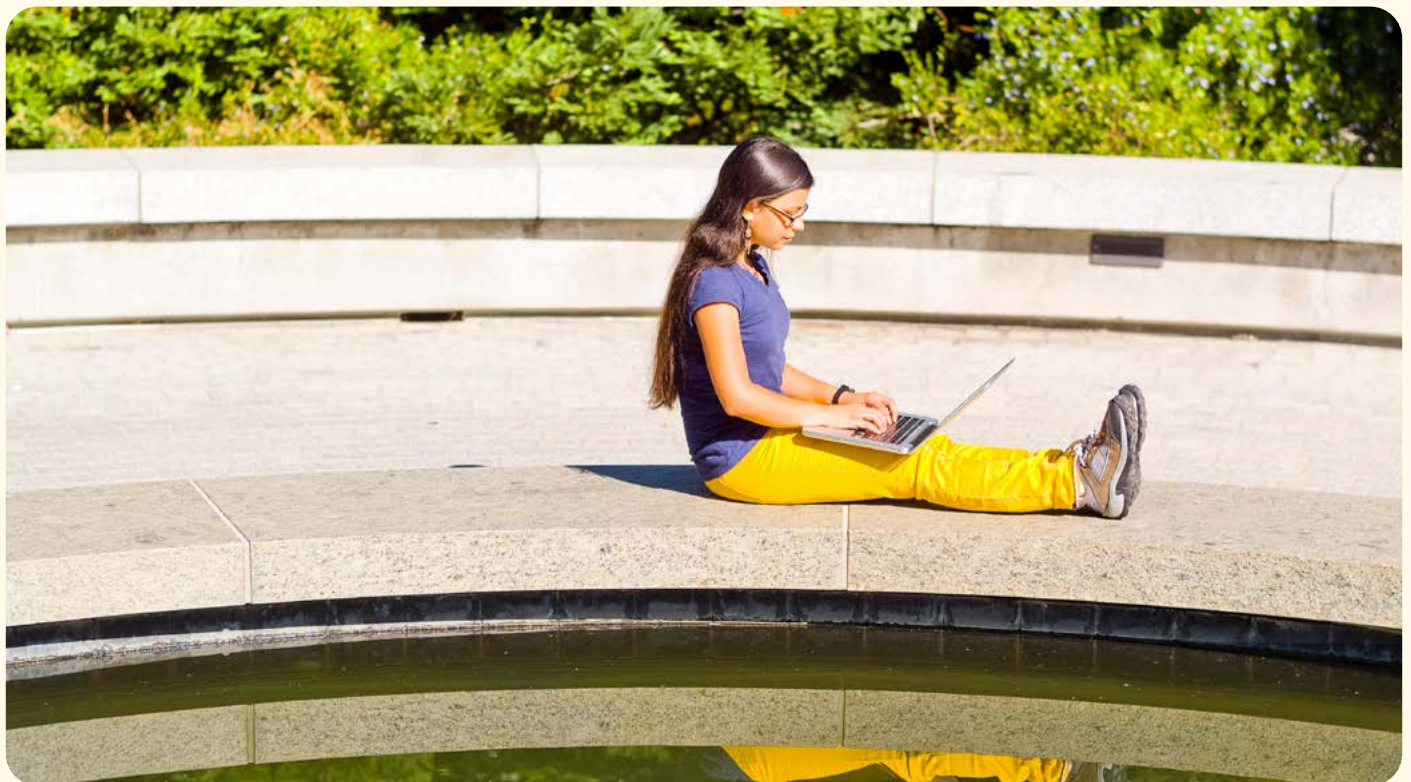
While higher education institutions are continuously investing resources to improve student experiences and outcomes, there are students who continue to face academic challenges such as academic probation, dismissal, and reinstatement and are often ignored in research and practice. The research highlighted in this brief found that 1) inconsistent academic and financial aid policies on student progress made it a challenge for students to graduate, therefore highlighting this organizational issue requires critical attention; 2) HSI grants are important in establishing programs and initiatives that fill in the gaps of support structures; 3) funding is not guaranteed, therefore putting in jeopardy the structures and systems of support for this vulnerable student population. At SU, there was variation in the academic review processes and the types of resources available to students who were experiencing academic challenges. The instability of support systems and resources available to students exemplifies that at the core, the academic progress and financial assistance policies are not student-centered, resulting in their failure to support students. Although Latinx students make up more than one third of all students on academic probation (Tovar & Simon, 2006), most studies examining such policies lack a racial and/or ethnic analysis as they group all students together (Denovchek, 1992; Suchan, 2016; Woosley, 2004) or group all minoritized students together under a single category in their analysis (Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2006; McDermott, 2008). This study is a critical contribution in furthering the field’s knowledge and providing organizational content for future studies on Latinx students who experience academic challenges (Tovar & Simon, 2006). Furthermore, this study is especially important as HSI practitioners, leaders, and scholars continue to conceptualize what it means to serve Latinx students. The question thus becomes, how does the field of higher education encourage campus leadership and entire college systems to institutionalize efforts needed to support the students who need it most? Furthermore, it is my hope that this research can prompt the field of higher education in considering how HSIs are relevant and important sites where equity is enacted in academic probation, dismissal, and reinstatement policies.

## Recommendations

Findings from this study inform the following recommendations that promote equitable research and practice, in order for HSRI to make a greater impact in serving students. Research should further explore the experiences connected to academic challenges through students as they are directly impacted by the repercussions of academic policies which often lack uniformity. Centering the narratives of students who experience probation, dismissal and those who reinstate will be critical in furthering the field and uncovering how and what must be done to transform higher education policies and make them as linear and equitable as possible. Lastly, future scholarship should build on the research presented in this brief to examine how campus leadership supports existing HSI efforts and the crucial role they play.

Policies—both academic and financial—within all UC campuses must become aligned to streamline students' progress. Additionally, I recommend that all students should have catalog rights. This means that colleges should consider allowing reinstated students to continue with their original catalog (if within a reasonable time-frame) as well as program graduation requirements to allow reinstated students to complete the program/major they initially signed up for.

To improve practice, UC campuses should create task forces to thoroughly analyze the impacts of their academic policies (i.e. probation, dismissal and reinstatement/readmission) on student outcomes and experiences. Campuses should also implement recommendations made by the task force committees and follow up with an evaluation of the implementations. UC campuses must address inequities embedded in their practices especially those related to student academic progress and its alignment with HSI efforts. For example, campus leadership and the ways in which they engage campus HSI efforts must be analyzed as an organizational structure. Although federal funds make it possible for institutions to do and create more for students, administration at well-resourced institutions such as the UC, should be supporting and promoting this work with or without the financial support from the federal government. Institutions must work to streamline these processes to eliminate unnecessary barriers and facilitate an already difficult experience for students who are already encountering challenges. As the UC aims to develop a definition of servingness that is responsive to the needs of all students, there needs to be a special focus on students who are facing academic challenges so that servingness is not only limited to those who are succeeding academically.



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