

Article

Latina Community College Presidents: Drawing from Cultural Intuition to Disrupt Leadership Norms in Higher Education

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Abstract: This study documents the unique personal and professional experiences that Latina leaders bring to the role of community college president. Guided by a Chicana Feminist conceptual framework, we examined the tools, strategies, and assets that Latina presidents possess to persist as higher education leaders within a white patriarchal dominant culture. As a research collective, we conducted *platicas* as a Chicana Feminist methodology with five Latina community college presidents in California. Each *platica* lasted between 60 and 90 min. Findings exemplified four sources of cultural intuition that Latina community college presidents drew from to redefine higher education leadership and drive student equity on campus: (1) personal experiences with marginality in educational spaces, (2) accumulated professional knowledge, (3) scholarly training in graduate school, and (4) the process of leading itself. The study found that Latina presidents possessed important knowledge and distinct perspectives based on their experiences as Women of Color, children of immigrants, and former community college students to guide their leadership approaches in equity driven ways.

Keywords: community college; leadership; diversity issues; qualitative research; higher education



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1. Introduction

Community colleges—like other institutions of higher education—serve as sites that reinforce white supremacist and patriarchal values (Carducci et al., 2024; Eddy et al., 2023). Leaders of Color in community colleges continue to encounter heightened criticism when prioritizing the needs of marginalized students (McNaughtan et al., 2021) and are hyper-racialized as “angry” during disagreements in decision-making (McNaughtan et al., 2021), while Latinas at the intersection of gender and ethnicity are scrutinized for their appearance, tone, and personal life choices (Davis & Greenlee, 2023; Sangha-Rico & Hernández, 2022). These dynamics are compounded by the fact that presidential leadership remains overwhelmingly dominated by white cisgender men (Eddy, 2018; Muñoz, 2010; Wilder, 2014). Nationally, 72% of college presidents identify as white men representing two-thirds (67%) of all college presidents leading institutions of higher education (Melidona et al., 2023).

When there is diversity within institutional leadership, women account for 33% of college presidents, Leaders of Color comprise 16%, and Women of Color are the least likely subgroup to serve as a CEO (Brown et al., 2002). These data points reify how the college presidency, despite decades of attempts to diversify the position, has stayed overwhelmingly

“older, white, and male” (Melidona et al., 2023), p. 3. The history of who leads is critical to note, as presidents significantly contribute to an institution’s culture, ideology, and future as leaders shape the policies, structures, and practices meant to improve student success (Brown et al., 2002). For example, research has shown that leaders often prioritize symbolic changes towards racial equity, such as changing racist names on buildings, as opposed to creating structural improvements that impact policy or practice (Tichavakunda, 2021; Wilson, 2013). Additionally, early leadership theories, such as the “great man” theories of the early 1900s, emphasized the traits and behaviors of great white, upper-class men, focusing on individuals in positions of power (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). These theories framed leadership as the actions and responsibilities of singular figures while searching for universal traits to predict effectiveness (Dugan et al., 2017; Northouse, 2021). By the 1960s and 1970s, leadership models continued to reflect traditional male norms, rooted in traits like authority and control. This trend evolved further in the 1980s and early 2000s with the rise of neoliberal leadership approaches. These models, heavily influenced by business practices, prioritized efficiency and strategic planning while drawing on male-centric imagery, emphasizing strength, power, and dominance (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). These historical frameworks collectively reinforced a narrow view of leadership, privileging male-dominated characteristics and sidelining diverse perspectives, particularly those of women and People of Color (Carducci et al., 2024).

To disrupt monolithic notions of educational leadership, our study focused on uncovering the experiences of Latina community college presidents and their approach to leading higher education institutions. Across the nation, Latinas represent 3% of university leaders, despite their larger share of the student population (Fuesting & Schneider, 2023). The demographics are slightly better within the California Community Colleges (CCCs), where our study is situated, as Latina CEOs represent nearly 11% of the system presidents (Mize, 2022). Although the history of higher education has reinforced white cis-men as the portrait of institutional leadership, there is a growing opportunity with shifting student demographics, high president turnover rates, and imminent retirements to better understand diverse presidents and their approaches to leadership (Mize, 2022).

2. Study Purpose

While there is a need to document and uplift the experiences of all Women of Color (WoC) in presidential roles, there is a need to acknowledge the underrepresentation of Latina leaders relative to student enrollment in states like California, where this study takes place. California is one of the most diverse states in the U.S.; it is home to the nation’s largest Latino/a/x population (15 million), Asian American and Pacific Islander population (7 million), and fifth largest Black population (2.8 million) (Reddy, 2024). With 116 institutions across the state, the California Community College system predominantly serves Students of Color (72%) of whom over half identify as female (54%) (California Community Colleges, 2023). Although most WoC presidents come from within community colleges, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions relative to the student demographics they serve (Keeton et al., 2021). The lack of representation among WoC sustains institutional racism and obstructs efforts to create truly equitable and inclusive spaces (Keeton et al., 2021). To build a stronger pipeline of future leaders in higher education, it is essential to understand and analyze their lived experiences.

This underrepresentation is particularly evident in the growing Latino/a/x student population within the California Community College system, where Latina students are increasingly enrolling, yet parity in leadership, including Latina presidents, faculty, staff, and administrators, remains elusive (Rodríguez et al., 2016; Sánchez et al., 2021). There is a dearth in the literature examining the everyday realities of Latinas serving in presidential

roles within higher education broadly and the community college context specifically. The stories and perspectives of five Latina presidents bring nuance to the study of community college leadership, outside of white heteronormative notions. We highlight the distinct ways that Latina presidents draw on their lived experience and cultural intuition to guide their leadership approach. Although Latina presidents shared many similarities in how they led, there were noticeable differences in what shaped their approach, such as phenotype, age, marital status, sexual orientation, and religion.

In this study, we drew on Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) to center the experiences of Latinas in culturally affirming ways that seek to co-create new knowledge and disrupt hegemonic patterns in presidential leadership. In light of this, we engaged in *platicas*, which are community-oriented conversations that focus on storytelling and uplifting the experiences of neglected voices as sources of empirical knowledge (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). Specifically, our study was guided by the following questions:

1. From a CFE perspective, how do Latina presidents draw on cultural intuition, ways of knowing, and/or assets to lead community colleges?
2. How do these assets allow Latina presidents to resist traditional approaches to institutional leadership?

To answer these questions, we held two *platicas* with each of the five community college presidents across an academic year. Based on a total of 10 *platicas*, we share how Latina leaders enter, navigate, and persist in presidential roles, their experiences with oppressive spaces in higher education, and their ability to draw on personal experience, family, culture, and community as strengths to lead their institutions as unapologetic Latinas.

3. Background: The History of Who Leads and Opportunities for Latinas

Leadership in higher education is frequently measured against the standards set by white leaders, leading to Women of Color being unfairly perceived as inadequate when they do not align with these expectations (Sánchez et al., 2021; Bensimon & Associates, 2022; Gause, 2021). Although community colleges have higher rates of women in leadership roles, the campus cultures, practices, policies, and norms in which they lead are entrenched in cis-white, masculine understandings of who can and should lead (Eddy & Khwaja, 2019). For example, the types of leadership skills, attributes, and characteristics that are considered “desirable” are heavily influenced by patriarchal notions of authority, such as demonstrating confidence, presenting a persona of being unafraid to face challenges head-on, and exuding power (Taylor & Killacky, 2010). When WoC do enter community college spaces, they operate within spaces that cater to white masculinity and are often positioned as deficient or lacking (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). For instance, WoC in leadership roles are consistently expected to adapt and assimilate to contexts that serve the white majority (Hernández, 2017; Wilson & Cox, 2012). When WoC leaders disrupt the status quo, they are met with resistance and hostility (Tichavakunda, 2021; Bensimon & Associates, 2022).

Despite facing oppression on multiple levels at the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity, studies have shown that WoC in leadership roles tend to challenge white-centered epistemologies and push back against pressures to assimilate (Baraka, 1997; Tran, 2014). However, very few academic articles have focused on the powerful and transformative assets that WoC, particularly Latinas, bring to leadership positions (Espino, 2024). Toward this end, our research is concerned with asking: What are the experiences, characteristics, and/or skills that Latinas enact as presidents? We posit that without acknowledging leaders’ cultural and gendered differences within the community college, the field of higher education is doomed to reproduce skewed and oppressive conceptualizations of leadership.

3.1. Challenges and Barriers Faced by Latina Leaders

Only a few studies centralize the experiences of senior Latina higher education administrators (Espino, 2024; Gutierrez Keeton, 2004). When there is published scholarship on Latinas leaders, most research aggregates them into larger Latino/Latinx groups, which tend to generalize and overlook the unique experiences of Latinas (de los Santos & Vega, 2008; Gutierrez et al., 2002; Padilla & Martinez, 2020) or have been conducted as part of dissertation projects (Avila, 2018; Cipres, 1999; Delgadillo, 2017; Elenes, 2020; Muñoz, 2008; Spencer, 2017; Urquiza, 2020). The amount of doctoral research on Latina community college presidents emphasizes a critical need and interest in uplifting the stories of Latina leaders, especially in highly diverse higher education institutions such as community colleges. While dissertation research provides a wealth of informative research, there is still a need for more peer-reviewed articles that provide a foundation for understanding the lived experiences of a new generation of presidential leaders that reflect the largest subgroup of students in community colleges. To address this gap, Latina researchers themselves have taken on the challenge of producing published scholarship within K-12 schools (Martinez et al., 2020; Oliva & Alemán, 2019) and colleges and universities broadly (Sánchez et al., 2021; Gonzales et al., 2013; Montas-Hunter, 2012).

These studies document the difficulties Latinas face in confronting institutional norms steeped in white heteronormative cultures (González, 2022). Because of the heavy influence of heteronormative, patriarchal, and white supremacist ideals and norms, Latinas are often subjected to stereotyping, tokenization, and cultural invisibility in early career roles where they feel misunderstood or unsupported by the leadership (Sánchez et al., 2021). Other barriers highlighted include needing to confront frequent microaggressions within their roles (Sánchez et al., 2021; Spencer, 2017), resisting racist and sexist stereotypes (Sangha-Rico & Hernández, 2022; Urquiza, 2020), and having to choose between family and their careers (Avalos, 2011). At the same time, Latinas are judged and policed in how they present themselves to others on campus regarding how they speak, their tone, outward appearance, and personal life choices (González, 2022). For this reason, some Latinas in higher education feel the need to hide or tone down their race/ethnicity to fit in on campus (Sánchez et al., 2021). As a result, Latinas tend to experience feelings of isolation and loneliness in their leadership roles, as the unequal power relations simultaneously make them hyper-visible and invisible (Gonzales et al., 2013).

In addition to enduring hostile work environments, the pathway to the presidency is laden with unspoken rules (Muñoz, 2010), far too few professional development opportunities (Hernández, 2017), and a lack of access to mentors who share similar backgrounds (Montas-Hunter, 2012; Martinez-Benyarko et al., 2022). These factors make it difficult for Latinas to advance to senior roles (Sánchez et al., 2021; Garcia, 2020; Velarde Pierce, 2023). Instead, Latinas are often kept in classified and mid-level positions where they must navigate frequent racial and gendered microaggressions (Sánchez et al., 2021; Garcia, 2020; Velarde Pierce, 2023). Since Latinas are often situated in service-oriented positions, they are often overlooked for leadership positions (Haro & Lara, 2003), especially if a “token Latina” already holds a leadership role within the institution (Espino, 2024). Due to these compounding issues, Latina administrators are left to fend for themselves as they pursue career advancement, as there are few culturally relevant professional development and mentorship opportunities (Melidona et al., 2023; Martinez-Benyarko et al., 2022).

3.2. The Cultural Assets Latinas Bring to Presidential Leadership

In the face of noted obstacles encountered along the pathway to the presidency, the number of Latina CEOs has increased over the last several years (Melidona et al., 2023; Mize, 2022). National data shows that Latina administrators are “rising to the presidency more quickly

after application and appointment”, meaning that when Latinas do apply, they attain the role quicker than other Women of Color (p. 7). In California, Latinas in administrative roles have almost doubled in the last 10 years ([California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2022](#)) and increased their share of community college CEOs ([Muñoz, 2010](#)). Despite these gains, Latina community college presidents remain understudied in higher education research ([González-Figueroa & Young, 2005](#)). Research indicates that Latinas who do pursue leadership roles are driven by the promise of changing campus cultures to be more equity-driven ([González, 2022](#); [Velarde Pierce, 2023](#)). As we situate our study, we note how studies have focused more on the pathway to the presidency and less on how they lead, especially regarding the experiences, perspectives, and cultural assets that Latina administrators bring with them once in the CEO role.

Latinas come with a wealth of knowledge, skills, and assets that are critical in serving the diverse demographics of community college students. For instance, Latina leaders pride themselves on “disrupting the organizational, gendered, and racialized norms of higher education” to transform their respective community college campuses ([Montas-Hunter, 2012](#), p. 26). This pride as a leader is a “big hoop energy” ([Urquiza, 2020](#)) that allows them to tap into their culture, values, and identity as strengths that are extended to the students that they aim to serve ([Elenes, 2020](#)). Studies show that Latina leaders come to college campuses with strong familial wealth that extends to students, where they seek to “be of service” and base decision-making on what they believe will best benefit students ([Elenes, 2020](#)). For this reason, Latinas are known to play a pivotal role in the educational success of Latina/o/x students as they tend to encompass a collectivistic culture that is focused on the well-being—mental, academic, economic—of the students they serve ([Medina & Luna, 2000](#); [Trumbull et al., 2001](#)).

The focus within academic scholarship on how Latinas lead as community college presidents is scant, especially in a way that affirms their cultural wisdom and approaches. Even less scholarship has focused on how the concept of cultural intuition informs practice and decision-making amongst Latina community college leaders. Rather, existing scholarship has primarily explored cultural intuition within the context of conducting educational research. For example, one group of Chicana/Latina scholars highlighted how cultural intuition guided their use of tools in research such as family photographs, images captured by students, artifacts created by teachers, and community archives to develop Freirean generative themes ([Rocha et al., 2016](#)). Another article highlighted how cultural intuition empowers Latina researchers to reclaim and integrate their cultural, linguistic, and academic identities, fostering collective sense-making and liberatory pedagogy while challenging traditional “objective” research methods and advocating for the liberation of Latino immigrant communities ([Cervantes-Soon, 2014](#)). Similarly, [Monzó \(2015\)](#) explained how her cultural intuition as a Latina shaped her ethnographic approach by integrating personal experiences, community memory, and a commitment to social justice. Through her cultural intuition, she was uniquely able to build trust, co-construct knowledge, and advocate for Latino immigrant families in ways that challenge traditional research paradigms and foster liberation. Only recently has the concept of cultural intuition extended beyond use in educational research and into higher education practice ([Rocha et al., 2024](#)). Rocha and colleagues ([Rocha et al., 2024](#)) use the concept of cultural intuition in practice by grounding its application in the everyday realities of empowering Students of Color and navigating systemic challenges in STEM-M contexts. Cultural intuition is employed as a practical toolkit that allows WoC scholar-practitioners to affirm and validate the racial and cultural identities of their students, creating culturally sustaining environments through asset-based approaches and high-impact practices ([Rocha et al., 2024](#)).

This recent shift in applying cultural intuition to higher education practice provides a valuable framework for understanding and uplifting the unique leadership approaches of Latinas in community colleges. By recognizing the intersection of cultural intuition and leadership, the field can better appreciate how Latinas navigate and transform educational spaces, particularly in diverse and dynamic contexts such as California community colleges. Given the diverse demographic makeup of community college students, especially in states like California, where this study takes place, it is paramount that Latinas—their stories, insights, and approaches to leadership—are centered on avoiding making harmful generalizations that preserve the status quo (Gonzales et al., 2013). Surveying the literature and situating our own work, it is critical to highlight the joy, culture, care, and assets Latinas bring into these new opportunities of being community college CEOs. As we move forward with our study on Latina leaders in community colleges, we center Chicana/Latina Feminisms (Gonzales et al., 2013) to understand the experiences of Latina presidents and the wealth of knowledge that they use to lead and transform community colleges (Gutierrez et al., 2002).

4. Conceptual Framework

We drew upon Chicana/Latina Feminist Theories (Delgado Bernal, 1998; del Alba Acevedo et al., 2001; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981) in this study's design, implementation, and analysis. This approach operates with the understanding that Chicana/Latinas lead lives with significantly different opportunity structures than men and white women. Much like the early Chicana feminist scholars that came before us, we approached this work by recognizing that intersecting forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, and homophobia) create violent and unjust environments for mujeres within society (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981). Within this broader tradition of Chicana Feminism, we followed key elements and principles from Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) built on Delgado Bernal's work. Engaging in CFE educational research meant committing to producing scholarship that honored the cultural wisdom of Communities of Color and resisted colonial ways of knowing. We recognized that to utilize a CFE approach, this research must:

1. Consider how intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism, inform the Chicana/Latina experience.
2. Challenge ideologically and historically oppressive representations of Chicanas/Latinas.
3. Involve Chicanas/Latinas in the knowledge formation process by viewing them as collaborators as opposed to subjects (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

When working with marginalized communities such as Latina presidents, employing a CFE framework involves wrestling with our researcher roles as activist scholars, embracing “alternative ways of knowing”, and interrogating our knowledge and practice that prioritizes whiteness (Delgado Bernal, 1998). We also extended our terminology to include Latinas, as not all study collaborators identified as Chicana. (Historically, Chicana has been used to describe the experiences of U.S.-born Mexican American women. Others subscribe to a political ideation of the term, adding connotations of collective struggle and resistance. Latina is a larger umbrella term that refers to mujeres who identify as descendants of Latin American countries, whether U.S.-born or immigrants (del Alba Acevedo et al., 2001)).

As a predominantly WoC researcher collective, we embraced CFE in conducting this research to authentically represent and center the voices of Latinas serving in president roles. We recognized that community colleges can be deeply oppressive spaces for Latinas. Our goal with this research was to recognize this reality while honoring their commitment to serve Communities of Color. Through this approach, we felt we could uncover an empowering narrative that showcases the remarkable resilience of Latinas, who remain persistent, connected, and unwavering in their commitment to their communities. Specifi-

cally, we found that through CFE, we could counter the underrepresentation of Latinas in higher education scholarship while recognizing the collaborators of this study as tactful and persistent Chingona intellectuals who resist oppressive representations by leading authentically (Gonzales et al., 2013).

To produce anticolonial scholarship, we also rejected dominant notions of qualitative research that call for researcher “objectivity” and posit the researcher as the ultimate keeper of knowledge. Instead, we embraced alternative ways of knowing by engaging Latina presidents in the research process through a collaborative effort that enacted a political urgency to understand and support the needs of Latinas in power. In this collaborative process, we drew upon our collective cultural intuition as researchers and study collaborators to guide the research process. Cultural intuition has been described as a “complex process that acknowledges the unique viewpoints that many Chicana/Latinas bring to the research process” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 561). In this paper, we utilized cultural intuition as an analytical tool to highlight how Latina administrators use their cultural intuition to inform their leadership styles as community college presidents.

Positionality

CFE allows us to unapologetically bring ourselves to this research process, from the approach to recruiting collaborators, how we collect our data, and the process of writing this manuscript. We deeply appreciate the time and labor shared with us by our Latina collaborators, as we recognize that who we are and what we do in the field of higher education cannot be separated from who we are. As writers of this article, we want to share that we are proud Scholars of Color, most of whom identify as cis-women. Specifically, Cynthia identifies as Chicana, Erin Nicole as Filipina American, Elizabeth as Chicana Desmadrosa, and Eric as a cis-gender Central American man. We are all first-generation scholars, proud children of immigrant parents who have had to navigate the academic borderlands—ni de aqui ni de alla. In doing this work, we honor the cultural wealth and funds of knowledge that we, alongside the Latina collaborators of this study, bring into higher education (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011; Yosso, 2005). The fact that we all came into this research project as first-generation college graduates who have historically been underrepresented and pushed out of higher education spaces was not lost on us. We quickly realized in collectively doing this work that each of us was experiencing many “firsts” with one another; Cynthia was navigating leading a research project and team as a doctoral student, Elizabeth and Erin Nicole were conducting research, and Eric was launching a research collective as a new faculty member—all for the first time.

These firsts were all happening while the mujeres of this research study were familiarizing themselves with their roles as the first Latina president of their respective community colleges. Our epistemological foundations are informed by the marginalization that we as Scholars of Color have experienced in schools. Through this shared understanding, we felt that our conceptual framing and methodological choices should reflect the unique perspectives and lived experiences of Latina presidents. A Chicana Feminist Epistemology and *pláticas* methodology allowed us to acknowledge all our lived experiences with marginality, honor our cultural intuition, and tell stories that depict strength and resistance.

5. Methodology

The findings from this study are derived from a more extensive qualitative study that sought to examine the experiences of Latina senior administrators within the California Community Colleges system. We identified ten Latina presidents from a system of 116 institutions by examining individual campus websites and documenting the race, ethnicity, and gender of senior administrators as listed online. After identifying all known

Latina presidents in the system, we attempted to contact each and invite them to participate in the project. In this paper, we share the stories of five Latina presidents. To apply CFE methodologies that “challenge objectivity, call for reciprocity, merge the body mind spirit, and inject a sense of political urgency to address educational inequities in Chican[a/o/x] communities” (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 52), we utilized *platicas*. *Platicas* is a qualitative methodology designed to produce an open dialogue between the researcher and the study participant (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Gonzalez, 2001). In Spanish, *platicar* means “to chat” or “talk”. While research questions guide a *platica*, a sense of informality is at the foundation of the methodology (Calderón et al., 2012; Gonzalez, 2001). Alternatively, *platicas* aim to denounce fixed interview protocols toward a more flexible approach that can be guided by the researcher’s cultural intuition (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). As detailed by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (Fierros & Bernal, 2016), there are five elements that distinguish *platicas* as a Chicana/Latina feminist methodological approach in educational research. This means that, first and foremost, *platicas* are often rooted in Chicana/Latina feminist theories. In this study, we recognized community colleges as a place where Latina presidents experience sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. As outlined in our findings, our *platicas* often centered on the realities of being women of color, immigrants, and from low-income communities—as both students themselves once—and now as leaders of minority-serving institutions.

Second, in *platicas* instead of study participants, there are study collaborators. This collaborative approach is at the heart of our study. We were committed to embracing participants as study collaborators by engaging them in the knowledge-production process. This involved inviting our study collaborators to pose questions for future *platicas* and coauthor pieces and to offer insights throughout the analysis process. This approach ensures that our study is not just about our findings but about the collective knowledge we have produced together. The third element is related to connecting everyday experiences to the inquiry for a holistic approach. In addition to discussing their experiences in their roles, we also talked about their mothers, children, hopes for the future, favorite pastimes, etc. While normative approaches to research might discourage deviations from the study scope, *platicas* emphasize the importance of everyday experiences.

The fourth element involves providing a space for healing. Exploring issues related to systems of oppression can bring up difficult memories and emotions. As a research collective, we provided plenty of time to process intense experiences while offering affirmations and a listening ear. For this reason, study collaborators often described our *platicas* as a virtual place where they could unburden themselves without judgment. We created this space by undertaking the fifth element of *platicas* around ensuring reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity. As researchers, we committed to holding ourselves accountable to “engaging the full humanity of researcher(s) and collaborators” (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023, p. 278). Part of that effort was avoiding being extractive of our study collaborator’s narratives and time. We asked how we could repay them, and none would take any monetary gift for their time. Instead, they asked that their stories be elevated. Towards this end, we have shared their stories at conferences and free and open to the public webinars. We also engaged in reciprocity by checking in via email and sending holiday cards. In order to facilitate vulnerability between us as researchers and our study collaborators, we often shared our own experiences with racism and sexism in higher education. Through this practice, we found that we created a trusting space where we could wholly share about ourselves and our struggles. Lastly, to practice researcher reflexivity, we used journal writing to detail if or how we were staying true to the five elements outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (Fierros & Bernal, 2016). Individually and as a group, we asked ourselves after each *platica* how we had engaged in vulnerability, centered issues of

racism and sexism, and provided a space for healing, for example. Together, these elements produced an incredible group *platica* between us as WoC researchers and our brilliant, strong, and dedicated Latina leaders in a way that revolved around our own ways of knowing.

5.1. Data Collection

From our list of Latina presidents in the CCCs, we contacted each institutional leader via email and shared the details of our study and interest in learning more about their experiences. Five presidents responded and agreed to participate as collaborators in our project. We spoke with each of the five presidents twice, once in the fall and once in the spring, for a total of 10 *platicas*. These conversations were held via Zoom and ranged between 90 min and 2 h. Only the recorded audio was downloaded from Zoom and used to transcribe our presidential *platicas*. Table 1 below shares some of the characteristics of our study co-collaborators and their institutional context. The first set of *platicas* focused on life history, educational background, and career experiences. We asked questions such as “How does your upbringing, family, and community influence your approach as a leader?” and “As president, what cultural assets do you draw on to help make decisions and lead on campus?” Our initial *platica* also utilized artifacts to engage in conversations around sources of pride overall and with regard to their educational and professional journeys and motivations to persist in their roles. Among the artifacts shared, Dra. Medina showed a cultural necklace she described as her “armor” when leading on especially difficult days, Dra. Aguilar brought a picture of her grandmother, and Dr. Vasquez read a heartfelt handwritten note from a student. These artifacts prompted storytelling about who they were as *mujeres*, mothers, partners, professionals, and community college presidents.

Table 1. Study Collaborator Characteristics.

Name	Degree Type	Presidency Tenure	Institution Name	Geographical Context	Institution Type
Dra. Medina	Ed.D.	1 year	Castillo Crest College	Rural	Hispanic Serving Institution
Dra. Espinoza	Ed.D.	5 years	Rio College	Suburban	Hispanic Serving Institution
Dra. Aguilar	Ed.D.	3 years	Echo Canyon College	Urban	Hispanic Serving Institution
Dra. Vasquez	Ed.D.	6 months	Reyes Valley College	Urban	Hispanic Serving Institution
Dra. Lopez	Ph.D.	1.5 years	DeOcampo College	Urban	Hispanic Serving Institution

To challenge the notion of researcher “bias” (Delgado Bernal, 1998), we also engaged in artifact sharing to build rapport and vulnerability between researcher and study collaborator. This sharing was essential, as vulnerability is an integral part of using *platicas*. The goal and outcome of this process was to begin our *platicas* by blurring the lines between researcher and “the research”, by deviating away from the question-and-answer format typical to qualitative interviews. Instead, the artifact sharing prompted us all to discuss subjects that were most meaningful to us. Additionally, because *platicas* do not follow rigid protocols, we then developed guiding questions for the second set of *platicas*, which aimed

to explore the everyday experiences of Latinas with racism and sexism in their roles and the strategies used to navigate those incidents as president. Additionally, we sought to adhere to a CFE and pláticas tradition by inviting our study collaborators to contribute to the knowledge production process. We did this by asking our study collaborators to craft a guiding question to ask the other Latina presidents based on their own experiences. This request yielded an illuminating line of questioning that taps into their experiential knowledge as administrators.

5.2. Analytic Process

After each plática, we engaged in researcher reflexivity practices such as online debriefs or journal writing to acknowledge the time and labor of our study collaborators. We shared how grateful we were for the opportunity to be in a space where we could be ourselves, share our successes and pain, and learn from one another as WoC. Most importantly, we used these exercises for accountability purposes. That is, we used these spaces to ensure that we were centering Latina voices and reciprocating the time and labor of our study collaborators. As WoC researchers, we used our cultural intuition to guide our analysis. We did not seek to decontextualize or parse the data into small chunks via most coding processes. Instead, we focused on using thematic coding to preserve the experiences articulated and how they mirrored other Latina presidents in the study (Hannegan-Martinez, 2023). Thematic coding allowed us to identify passages and themes within the pláticas relevant to our research questions.

The first phase involved an open coding process where each researcher was assigned 1–2 pláticas transcripts to review (Saldaña, 2021). Researchers were encouraged to thematically identify broad themes using their cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Using one's cultural intuition as a researcher means having the ability to make meaning of your data in unique ways. Building on the work of Corbin and Strauss (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), who coined the term theoretical sensitivity, argue that researchers can extend one's personal experience to "include collective experience" and "community memory" (p. 563). A Chicana/Latina's cultural intuition is informed by personal experiences, professional experiences, existing literature, and the analytic process itself (Delgado Bernal, 1998). As a result, cultural intuition is a process that is "experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, and dynamic" (Delgado Bernal, 1998, pp. 567–568). As a predominately WoC research group, we relied heavily on our cultural intuition as researchers, allowing our knowledge and experiences to guide this initial coding process. From a close examination of the data, we began by individually using keywords as outlined by Neem and colleagues (Naeem et al., 2023). Some of the keywords that were used in this initial phase were "emotional labor", "sexism", "mentorship", "student equity", "family", "community", "representation", "appearance", and "paving the way". These keywords or phrases were designed to identify recurring patterns that could be used to summarize our study collaborator's experiences as leaders (Naeem et al., 2023).

After the initial coding process, we met as a research collective to discuss the keywords we found. Our group discussions were instrumental in highlighting the influence of appearance on Latina leaders' treatment, the pivotal role of family in their lives, and the ways Latina leaders instigate positive change for marginalized students on campus. These discussions led to the collective development of a set of initial codes for further analysis. We established parent codes such as "leadership approaches", "equity", "community/family", "sexism", "racism", and "identity". In the second coding phase, we distributed a new set of transcripts to each researcher for review using the established codes. We reconvened as a research team to discuss new emerging themes and those previously discussed. After numerous conversations around our codes, we delved into the themes by considering our

theoretical framing (Crabtree, 1999). We identified two overarching themes; the first focused on what shaped the leadership approaches and decision-making of Latina community college presidents, while the second focused on how the role of hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy acted as barriers in their roles. This paper is a product of the analysis of the former, while the latter will be explored in another paper. The data were too robust to be included in a single paper.

At this stage, we adopted a theory-driven and deductive approach to coding (Crabtree, 1999). Through a CFE lens that seeks to challenge ideologically and historically oppressive representations of Chicanas/Latinas, we began discussions around how Latinas lead. In the coding process, we found that a common occurrence was the overlap of the codes “leadership approaches” and “student equity”. This overlap led us to explore why and how Latina leaders chose to lead. We discussed how they often drew on their experiences to validate their drive and motivation to focus on student equity and decided to code a third time. As we discussed our own cultural intuition throughout this analysis, it dawned on us that Latina leaders were also using their own cultural intuition to lead. To check whether these themes captured the coded data, we then coded for “personal experiences”, “professional experiences”, “the literature”, and “the process of analysis itself” as child codes under “cultural intuition” as a parent code (Eddy et al., 2023). Thus, cultural intuition from CFE became an analytic tool. We met again to confirm that Latina leaders draw on their cultural intuition to drive student equity on campus. This was evident as the “cultural intuition” parent code had appeared throughout the data corpus alongside “student equity” and “leadership approaches”. Using member checking as a tool for trustworthiness, we sent preliminary findings to our study collaborators to ensure accuracy, see how themes resonated with them, and identify potential areas of misalignment. Our co-collaborators provided affirming feedback for how we captured their experiences and ensured the connection between our analysis process and what we share in the findings.

6. Findings: Cultural Intuition as a Source of Equity-Driven Presidential Leadership

Our pláticas highlight how Latina presidents persist in their role as they encounter various institutional barriers based on gender and culture that shape how they can lead. Their narratives detail the many ways their intersecting identities function as tools, strategies, and assets to draw on as presidents. Our findings emphasize how Latina presidents tap into their cultural intuition to persist in their presidential roles and enact transformational change within the field of higher education. Specifically, we highlight how Latina presidents use their cultural intuition to guide, motivate, and inform their leadership approaches. As one president shared, “My social-cultural realities and experiences cannot be separated from who I am; I bring [them] to the table. . . it drives my interactions with people and the way I make decisions”. In the next section, we discuss the sources of cultural intuition that Latinas bring into their leadership roles: (1) marginalization in educational spaces, (2) accumulated professional knowledge, (3) scholarly training in graduate school, and (4) the process of leading itself.

6.1. Personal Experiences with Marginality in Educational Spaces

“I have that empathy based on real experience. Right? I lived it as an immigrant student and English learner. I know it’s real. I know the fear.”—Dra. Medina

Not unlike many Latina/o/x students, Dra. Medina and her family were forced to flee her country and settle in the United States to escape poor living conditions and drug-related violence in Latin America. After working various service and manual labor-related jobs, she decided to pursue higher education at a local community college—after some convincing

from her father; who had seen an advertisement on TV. Her story highlighted many realities of minoritized community college students today, from struggling to enroll in classes to the importance of finding a resource like Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). For Dra. Medina, it was clear that her passion for improving student equity came from her own difficulties navigating the community college as a Latina English Language Learner and low-income student. In particular, she shared that her experiences with food insecurity and immigration status were especially salient in steering her leadership approaches. She reflected upon her own experiences managing college costs, stating that she was “eating Snickers bars for lunch every day” because that was what she could afford. Based on her awareness of food insecurity amongst students from low-income backgrounds, Dra. Medina shared:

“That’s why I’m a great supporter of food pantries because I know that students go hungry and they don’t know where to turn. . . When I saw the struggle of my students in front of me, that was my struggle ten years prior [as a CC student], I thought, wait a minute, that was not my life; this is a [wider] problem. And how come ten years later, we’re still having that problem? That’s what made me think about administration. Maybe I need to do something beyond the classroom because in the classroom you affect these 20 students. . . that systemic change doesn’t happen in the classroom”.

As Latina leaders, Doctoras Aguilar, Espinoza, Lopez, Medina, and Vasquez shared how their experiences as low-income, first-generation Students of Color who dealt with food insecurity, low expectations from professors, and other significant structural barriers informed their leadership approach. Dra. Lopez shared that as president, she frequently thought about how to leverage her power to provide students with essential resources to succeed on campus. As a former community college student herself, she recalled a moment when her classmates discussed their weekend plans to shop for new clothes. She stated:

“My classmates would talk about, ‘We’re going shopping for new clothes.’ What that meant for me was going to the thrift store. Or, [pauses] I’m just going to be very honest with you, we would go at night to the drop-offs, [the] Goodwill boxes. . . we would go through that and see what would work in terms of new clothes. I knew that we did not have the same resources that others did. We felt like outsiders because we did not have papers. . . At the community college, you see it all the time. . . That’s the piece that I’ve been able to see [now as president]. I want to make sure that we provide students with the resources that they need, but not everybody needs the same resources, so how do we do that? And how do we do that very intentionally and thoughtfully?”

In this quote, Dra. Lopez emphasizes how her personal experience as a formally undocumented community college student from a low-income background shapes the way she leads as president today. As a leader, she has a deep and personal understanding of the importance of being student-centered and considering the ways the community college can function to support those who need it the most. Notably, Dra. Lopez also describes knowing what it feels like to exist on the margins. “We felt like outsiders”, she noted, because she and her family were undocumented at the time that she took courses at the local community college. Now as president, those personal experiences fuel her advocacy for student resources and ensuring that there is adequate funding for basic needs support, an undocumented resource center, and connections with community organizations. Latina presidents often leverage these types of personal experiences to transform their institutions in ways that consider the lived realities of students whose identities are like their own. Dra. Medina understands first-hand what her students experience because she “lived it” herself

as a low-income student who faced food insecurity while attending college. Her level of understanding from lived experience becomes a source of information as a campus leader. This knowledge is then used to develop and implement student-centered equity initiatives on campus, such as food pantries.

The passion and motivation to advance equity for minoritized students as leaders on campus are often sourced from their personal experiences as students struggling to succeed on the margins. For example, Dra. Espinoza expressed that her commitment to serving community college students came from her experiences as a low-income, first-generation, and Latina college student. She explained that growing up in a single-parent household brought financial difficulties for her and her sister to go to college comfortably. As a first-generation student, she explained that she did not “know what the hell [she] was doing” in college and took on many low-paying jobs to survive and complete her degree. For this reason, Dra. Espinoza unapologetically centers minoritized students in her fight for racial equity. She claims that her personal experiences motivate her to push the envelope on campus, even when her decisions are questioned. She said, “I understand some of the trials and tribulations that they’re experiencing, and I lead with that in mind”. An important yet overlooked quality of Latina presidents is that they understand the types of challenges faced by the community of students they serve being first-generation, experiencing food insecurities, and navigating higher education as Students of Color. These experiences become sources of cultural intuition and allow Latina presidents to lead community colleges with a nuanced understanding of the root causes of inequity and opportunities to address them.

Many of our study collaborators served community college campuses with significant representations of students whose identities matched their own, and one Latina president graduated from the institution she now leads. Dra. Aguilar spoke passionately about Echo Canyon College, an institution nestled in her hometown. Dra. Aguilar had experienced Echo Canyon as a student and longtime staff member. Now as president, she is centered and driven by her desire to serve as a “transformational servant leader” on campus. She claimed this commitment was “personal” many times throughout the platica. In the wake of COVID-19 and the calls for racial justice in the summer of 2020, Dra. Aguilar spoke candidly about the demands of her role and the exhaustion that comes with it. Despite describing feeling burnt out, Dra. Aguilar carried on with the work because of her personal ties to the community, stating:

“I just wanted to share why the struggle is so significant, because it’s personal. . . Other presidents took two weeks off over the summer, and here I am trying to take a day here and there, and I’ve only taken three since February. For me, the fact that obviously I was born and raised in this community. . . I’m a graduate of this institution. . . It’s personal for me to do the best that I can in my role to support my students and the community because this community has contributed so much to me”.

Amid the pandemic, Dra. Aguilar found herself working 12-to-16 h days and explained that this level of leadership and exhaustion was “fulfilling a purpose” for both her community and her mother, whose dying wish was for her daughter to “help people, especially those that need the most help in life”. Many of our presidents referred to their families, especially mothers, as a source of inspiration and motivation. Dra. Aguilar used her mother’s memory and dreams to persist in her role and constantly work to improve students’ lives. As president, it is much more than leading a college but ensuring that the aspirations and needs of students, staff, and the broader community are served. Her leadership approach was driven by intrinsic and familial motivations to serve and help others. Most importantly, this shows how Dra. Aguilar’s personal experiences and her identities

cannot be detached from her role as president. She is deeply rooted in the institution and the community it represents, growing more effective and powerful as a leader. However, she is always mindful of the roots that sustain her. This sense of responsibility was common amongst all study collaborators as they reflected upon their experiences navigating financial hardship, experiencing the U.S. education system as immigrants, or living in mixed-status families. In this way, personal experience becomes a source of knowledge and a motivating factor to wield their power as presidents in ways that enact transformational change for the students they serve.

6.2. *Progressing to the Presidency: Accumulated Work Experiences*

“My inspiration was that I could work with the population of learners that I wanted to work with [which includes] first-generation, low-income, Students of Color.”—Dra. Espinoza

Dra. Espinoza fondly recalled leaving her undergraduate student job as a dishwasher on campus to work as a counselor aid. Within that position, she shared a growing inspiration to continue working with first-generation, low-income Students of Color. With this goal in mind, she went on to work for TRIO programs before making her way to the community college. Her reasoning for the change was that she could work with “the population of learners that [she] wanted to work with, and that was first-generation, low-income Students of Color”. She served in various roles within the community college, including Dean and Vice President of Student Services. After more than a decade of experience, Dra. Espinoza applied for the CEO vacancy and was named the first Latina president at that college. Mirroring the other four presidents, advancing, and progressing across roles in higher education gave each president an accumulation of knowledge and skills to lead with cultural humility, foreground equity, and a deep understanding of the oppressive policies and structures that need to be dismantled on campus. These various professional roles inspired her to “take the leap and go into community college” and act against the systemic racism within higher education institutions. She stated:

“The work that I was doing as an undergraduate, focused on working with Students of Color who were not getting access to the university. I knew that there was some disproportionate impact against Students of Color, right? I think more experientially, as an undergraduate, because of the program that I was working in, it really illuminated for me, “Wow, there are these kinds of social, and racial inequities”... But at the community college, I had the good fortune of participating early in the development of student equity plans. So, before they really took hold in recent years, we did dabble with developing equity plans and disaggregating data by race. So, I [took] an early interest in equity work”.

Although Dra. Espinoza’s initial work experience as a student catalyzed her desire to provide resources and opportunities to Students of Color; her added professional experience expanded her views and consciousness of equity. Latina presidents are often willing to serve as instruments for transformative change because they understand the profound structural issues of inequality embedded within institutions of higher education. Most notably, the Latinas in this study view working for a community college as an opportunity to impact the lives of Students of Color positively. Their work experiences, whether as student workers or staff, amplify the need for a more diverse representation of community college staff. Latinas seek to take on that role as they observe a need for more targeted student initiatives. Dra. Lopez, for example, holds the importance of mentorship in high regard because of her early experiences as a classified staff member at her local community college:

“I worked as a classified staff member [at my prior institution]. You get to meet a lot of people. [You form] relationships, connections, and so that’s where your formal and informal mentors and advocates come in. Many of the counselors at [the] college encouraged me to continue, and they basically said to me, “I know you’re working here, I know it’s a full-time job, I know that you have surpassed your expectations and the expectations of your family, but we think you have a lot more potential and you really need to think about continuing with your education”. That had such a significant impact on my life that I decided to continue with my education. Seeing how we had the impact and the ability to help someone change their path to one that would provide them with the kind of economic support that was most necessary. . . I think it was just some of those experiences were just really important for me, like I want to be part of that”.

Working in the community college context for years, Dra. Lopez provided a set of networks and mentors that helped facilitate social mobility. Working with like-minded individuals who are ready and able to champion Students of Colors’ success is pivotal to Latina presidents’ approach. Dra. Lopez wants to build a pipeline for other minoritized students to see personal, academic, and professional success because that is what her coworkers did for her. Latina leaders draw on such experiences as a reminder and source of inspiration to continue striving to make a difference for minoritized students who face added roadblocks as they seek higher education. The work experiences that Latina presidents accumulate in different higher education sectors—whether as students; staff; or administrators—act as sources of information and motivation for our study collaborators. In many ways, it drove them to seek leadership positions that enhanced their power and agency to create systemic change within the community college.

Part of transforming community colleges also included improving the presidential pipeline for other Latinas; this was especially true for Dra. Aguilar and Dra. Vasquez, who both participate in an organization designed to grant professional development opportunities for other Latina/o/xs in the field. Their efforts to provide mentorship to other Latina/o/x administrators were driven by their own work experiences as former community college student affairs practitioners and administrators. In their previous roles as Vice Presidents within academic services and student affairs, they identified a need for more “race and gender-conscious approaches to the professional development circle”, as Dra. Vasquez shared. All the Latinas in this study noted that most of the career advice and mentorship that they received before becoming president came from men. Despite expressing feeling grateful to their mentors for their words of encouragement and guidance throughout their careers, our collaborators expressed a longing for Latina mentorship.

To help increase diverse representation within the presidential pipeline, Dra. Vasquez and Dra. Aguilar set out to be the representation that they wish they had in their previous community college roles. Thus, offering mentorship and professional development opportunities to other Latina/o/xs was important to their approaches as leaders because it was a critical part of their careers. Being told that they could and should lead community colleges gave them the confidence that they needed to apply. Given this experience, Dra. Aguilar recognized the unique “privilege, power, and influence” that she had as a Latina president. For this reason, she said, “I want to mentor others. I want to bring along others. I want to give opportunities to others. [Women] that may not have been hired at other institutions have been granted an opportunity [at my institution]”. As president, Dra. Aguilar (alongside all the other Latinas in this study) felt a responsibility to improve conditions not only for students but for other marginalized staff, faculty, and administrators. Based on their own work experiences traversing the presidential pipeline, they identified a need to provide more culturally relevant professional development opportunities.

6.3. Scholarly Training: Grounding the Action Taken as Presidents

“My doctoral studies focused on developmental education and Students of Color because where are most undergraduates? Community colleges, right? And what courses have they taken for decades and decades? Remedial education, right? They’ve fallen through the cracks, but clearly I have an interest, given my doctoral studies. When I first arrived at Rio College, I worked closely with our faculty to basically overhaul developmental education. We basically revamped the placement process and the curriculum to pave the way for more Students of Color, particularly Latinx and our African American students, to access college-level courses.”—Dra. Espinoza

Dra. Espinoza’s dissertation research on the detrimental impacts of remedial coursework on Students of Color’s educational attainment directly influenced her efforts as president to remove placement exams. By researching the topic, Dra. Espinoza was better suited to address such institutional barriers at Rio College with added insights, skills, and intentionality. As educated WoC, Latina presidents draw upon the knowledge and skills developed through their doctoral studies to enact equity efforts on their respective campuses. All five Latina presidents that we spoke to have a terminal degree, earning a doctorate in disciplines like educational leadership and policy studies. Their dissertation studies are also often centered on the needs of marginalized communities, such as women presidents in community colleges and Latino/a/x adult learners. The skills learned in their graduate education proved to be extremely necessary and valuable in discussing, advocating, and acting on advancing racial equity on campus. Having the ability to ground decision-making in quantifiable data, existing research via literature, and recommendations from experts in the field of higher education uniquely positions Latina-led campuses with predominately minoritized student populations. This scholarly training gave the Latina leaders of this study a heightened awareness of the power of grounding efforts in data to enact transformational change for their minoritized student populations. Our study collaborators constantly shared how the knowledge and insight gained from their graduate studies extended beyond “existing literature” to what we call “scholarly training”. As it emerged in our research, scholarly training for Latina presidents includes the critical knowledge acquired through the literature and engaging in research as former doctoral students.

Many of the Latina presidents utilized the skills and knowledge learned in their dissertations and graduate school training to inform how they approached their leadership roles. They emphasized the importance of leveraging data and relevant literature to influence decision-making with key stakeholders on campus. Dra. Lopez, in particular, demonstrated valuing the use of data to inform student success. She insisted that data should be “at the forefront” so that the college can fulfill its mission of helping students. Data, Dra. Lopez said, “tells us about our students and how they are succeeding or not succeeding”. Dra. Lopez even likened leading as president to dissertation research in our pláticas. She mentioned:

“As part of my first six months [as president I attended many listening sessions and], there were a lot of different opinions. It’s kind of like your thesis or dissertation, when you start looking at themes, these are the themes that are emerging. So I think all of that has helped me really refine the direction that I think we as a college need to move toward”.

In this excerpt, Dra. Lopez clearly makes connections between the process of conducting dissertation research and how she has acted as a leader. At the beginning of the presidency, she spent time listening to the experiences and perspectives of her campus

community and then used those perspectives to formulate areas of need. Their stories acted as data that she then used to make decisions for the campus. Dra. Espinoza shared similar sentiments, stating that she liked to use relevant literature to raise critical consciousness with campus constituents to facilitate a learning environment where dialogue about race and racism is welcomed and data are used to inform decision-making. Dra. Vasquez saw value in using her knowledge of critical and culturally relevant literature to guide her leadership approach. She said:

“When I was doing my graduate work, I came across Tara Yosso’s work, [and] that’s where it really cemented for me. . . I started to delve into the research around, especially Latino/Latina, Communities of Color, the ways that we tell stories, the way that we have dichos, or that you pass along tradition; for me, that started to make sense. I’m like, well if we’re trying to change what leadership looks like, or what someone empowered looks like, then we have to start modeling how the story can sound different”.

As demonstrated in previous findings, Latina presidents tend to model a new kind of leadership that reflects their own cultural backgrounds and values. In this example, stories are posited as a valuable method of relaying information and changing dominant (i.e., white heteronormative) narratives. Additionally, Dra. Vasquez describes being inspired by the work of Yosso ([Avalos, 2011](#)), whose scholarship is known to reject deficit narratives and embrace the often-ignored Community Cultural Wealth that Students of Color bring to school. This knowledge is essential in forming asset-based mindsets that position Students of Color as capable learners who obtain overlooked forms of capital. Possessing this asset framing through a critical lens is essential to equity efforts and enabled Dra. Vasquez to acknowledge and validate the strengths that Communities of Color bring to campus. Most importantly, this scholarly training with asset-based frameworks allows her to see her value as a Latina president, follow her cultural intuition, and lead in ways that acknowledge the beauty of being diverse.

6.4. *The Process of Leading*

“I recognize that I have to be on my game in regard to my professional career [in terms of] performance. But I want to lead with the heart; it’s a different perspective. Really bringing the heart to the work is just not something you hear. I’m here to make a difference.”—Dra. Aguilar

As Latina presidents construct their own version of what it means to be a transformational leader, they draw upon the process of leading itself as a source of cultural intuition. These mujeres witness how others lead, take stock of how others react to their leadership approach, and use that knowledge to inform their leadership style, representing their authentic selves. This learning process is important to our study collaborators, as many of them admitted to struggling with imposter syndrome, especially at the beginning of their careers. At the time of our platica, Dra. Medina was new to her position, serving as president for one year. She described feeling anxious about being upfront with her equity efforts and hid some of her personal identities to avoid discrimination in the workplace. Dra. Medina’s fear of retaliation was overshadowed by the calls for racial justice, and the Black Lives Matter movement erupted during the summer of 2020. She said:

“As president for a year, I’ve been more cautious. Trying to get the landscape, trying to find my voice. . . With the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. . . I said okay. We have no more excuses. I have no more excuses to be soft on it. Navigat[ing] my first year, I tried understanding the sensitivities, or what would you say now? White fragility? But now it’s open, and

in fact, in that meeting with my management group, it was sort of therapeutic, [to] actually share things that they didn't know about myself. . ."

When we spoke to Dra. Medina, she admitted to initially making decisions to utilize race-evasive language, primarily because her community college is in a very conservative area. Her strategy was to avoid direct conversations about race and racism to "soften the ground at [Castillo Crest College] to have a real conversation around race" later. While apprehensive at first, the process of leading itself taught Dra. Medina that advancing racial equity involves speaking frankly about the conditions that lead to inequitable student outcomes. It entails being true to who Latina presidents are and what they care about. Through this process, Latina leaders realize that their aspirations to confront institutional barriers bear more fruitful outcomes when conversations are open, honest, and receptive to the lived realities of minoritized students.

Drawing on this form of cultural intuition is critical to developing our study collaborators as leaders. As Latina presidents amass varied experiences, understandings, and skill sets, they adjust their leadership style to fit their personality traits and cultural backgrounds. In some instances, the approaches of our study collaborators are based on the techniques, strategies, and approaches of others. Dra. Lopez illustrated an experience that solidified her own leadership style. She said:

"[My colleague] enjoyed the aggressive behavior of my fellow vice presidents, and I didn't engage in that. I was clear, I was direct, but I was not going to get into a fight. My health was more important to me. . . I think that just made me stronger as a leader finding my own way of doing things and not the same way someone else wants me to do them. Again, I think a lot of my leadership abilities and qualities come from either what I have experienced in a positive way from other leaders or negative things that I've experienced where I don't want to repeat them".

As demonstrated by this quote, Latinas constantly work on recalibrating their approach to leading as workplace challenges arise. In this example, Dra. Lopez was compared to white, heteronormative approaches to leadership, where she was expected to be "aggressive". Witnessing the patronizing behavior of her counterparts, Dra. Lopez validates her style as a kinder leader who prioritizes collective care amid all the responsibilities and roles a CEO plays. Coming against these types of expectations was common amongst all study collaborators. Conceptualizations of how to "lead properly" were often used against them, forcing them to push back. Finding their "own way" of doing things was instrumental to their development as leaders despite being pressured to adjust to the norm. Instead, all the Latinas in this study would refer back to their compass, which involved (1) creating equitable community college environments and (2) leading authentically. As Dra. Aguilar said, "What keeps me going is my commitment to do the best that I can for our students, for this community. . . I'm not going to pretend to say that everything's perfect but I'm still moving forward, and nothing will stop me". We highlight the constant trailblazing for Latina leaders and the ways they find their way of doing things when given the opportunity to serve as presidents. Leading is instrumental to the evolution of our study collaborators, and it all centers on the needs of marginalized students. For the work to be sustainable, Latinas express a desire and need to lead authentically. This looked different to each Latina president but included embracing their dark skin, maintaining a soft-spoken demeanor, refusing to wear a particular hairstyle, wearing form-fitting dresses, or "being rough around the edges". Over time, Latina leaders learn to lead in ways that make the most sense to who they are. As Dra. Espinoza said, "Being an authentic leader [means] embracing all that I am and what I believe and bringing that to the table". These

Latina leaders show that they can be assertive and responsive and make critical decisions as presidents, all the while centering students and colleagues that bear the impact of these decisions.

7. Discussion

How Latinas lead and what they can do as presidents are central questions in our study. We explicitly focused on Latina presidents to understand their approaches to the presidency and how their emergence as new leaders brought novel approaches to the everydayness of being a CEO. Our study was guided by two questions seeking to explore and highlight the ways Latina presidents draw on their cultural intuition to lead in new and different ways as community college presidents. To obtain this, we utilized Chicana Feminist Epistemology to center the voices of five Latina presidents. We engaged in two 90 min pláticas with each of our five study collaborators to create a space that celebrated and uplifted their everyday experiences while exploring the racialized and gendered experiences within their roles as Latina presidents. Our analysis of their narratives emphasized the importance of cultural intuition as Latina presidents navigate their leadership efforts to survive and thrive in oppressive systems.

To address our first research question, we applied and extended the concept of cultural intuition to examine Latina presidents' cultural journeys and experiences along the leadership pipeline (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Our study collaborators demonstrated cultural intuition through the following categories: (1) experienced marginalization in educational spaces; (2) accumulated professional knowledge; (3) scholarly training in graduate school; and (4) the process of leading itself. Throughout our pláticas and artifact sharing, aspects of our study collaborators' cultural intuition as Latina leaders emerged as meaningful and impactful markers of internal strength and love in a professional environment that criticizes them as *mujeres* that are "too unprofessional looking", "too equity-minded", or "too soft-spoken". In our second question, we highlighted the ways that cultural tools, strategies, and experiences are applied to enable Latinas to lead in their own ways beyond traditional norms for the presidency (Eddy et al., 2023). Whether leadership is defined by the way they look, act, and talk or by the type of issues they advocate for and how they obtain so, these Latina presidents find ways to stand united to support each other because they understand the impact their presence has on present and future Latina leaders in higher education. These *mujeres* also placed great importance on building and maintaining a community for themselves, both on and off campus. Similarly, they described how the tools learned in graduate school equipped them with theories, frameworks, and readings to apply directly to their decision-making process as presidents. Next, we discuss the significance of our work with Latina presidents. We posit that findings from this study emphasize the ways Latinas link theory and practice in a way that centers student equity within community colleges. Then we close with actionable recommendations to improve the pipeline to the presidency as well as the conditions faced by WoC once in the role.

7.1. "I Cannot Separate Whom I Am"

Scholars (Haro & Lara, 2003) have noted how the wave of retiring presidents offers an opportunity to move away from the old "Hero" leadership model prevalent in higher education, which tends to rely on hierarchy, positional leadership, and the assumption that a man is a prototypical leader. Scholars examining leadership in higher education have documented how large percentages of administrators believe that a "great man" or "hero" appropriately describes what a leader is (Eddy, 2018). Similarly, others have argued that despite the increased diversity in student demographics, those who lead tend to still be mostly white (men) who fail to bring in new and different approaches to grapple with

the complexity faced in community colleges today (Elenes, 2020; Burmicky & Duran, 2022; Amey et al., 2020). Thus, what we offer in our work are clear examples of how Latina presidents bring new approaches to the role and how they can negotiate their multiple identities and responsibilities while leading institutions of higher education. Our findings highlight how our co-collaborators drew from their intersecting identities, personal experiences, and cultural intuition to lead their institutions, establish deeper visions for equity, and center the needs of students and community members. They modeled an approach to leading community colleges grounded in their own experiences navigating educational barriers as students. They found ways to intentionally bring in their identities as WoC, immigrants, and former community college students, rather than trying to separate or compartmentalize who they are as president. These approaches serve as possibility models that push against white, cis-patriarchal ways of leading in higher education. This type of research is emerging alongside a growing recognition of asset-based frameworks, such as community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge, in educational leadership. Applied critical leadership, for example, highlights how culturally and linguistically diverse leaders draw on the positive aspects of their identities to inform leadership practices, leveraging their multicultural funds of knowledge to create inclusive, equity-centered approaches (Santamaría, 2014; Moll et al., 2001). These evolving paradigms underscore the transformative potential of leadership grounded in cultural assets and lived experiences, challenging deficit-oriented narratives in the field (Santamaría, 2014).

7.2. Deeper Visions of Equity

Similarly, we showcased how, through their experiences as WoC, Latina presidents demonstrate an ability to acknowledge the racialized structures and gendered oppression in society and how they are mirrored in higher education. As such, they seek to address and take action on root causes of inequity that perpetuate harm for minoritized students in community colleges. Beyond educational credentials and prior positions held, we see that Latina presidents' cultural assets and personal experience tend to ground their understanding of equity and the need to use their position of power to make their institution an equitable environment for students, colleagues, and the community. This approach aligns closely with the principles of applied critical leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015), which emphasize the cultural knowledge, skills, and dispositions of leaders from historically marginalized communities as strengths uniquely suited to fostering equity-oriented change. Whether it is addressing basic needs issues like Dra. Medina, dismantling known barriers in developmental education for Students of Color like Dra. Espinoza, or improving economic conditions for the surrounding community like Dra. Lopez, each of the five Latina presidents spoke of taking on the CEO role to tackle persistent barriers to student success. These deeper visions of equity were grounded in their experiences as WoC, first-generation students, immigrants, and individuals facing economic insecurities. In contrast, these same cultural assets and ways of leading highlighted in our work are undervalued when recruiting, identifying, and hiring community college presidents (Mize, 2022). The lack of appreciation for new approaches is misaligned with various research that points to the importance of drawing from cultural background, value systems, and personal experiences to lead. For example, while studying community college leaders in Texas, Delgado and Ozuna Allen (2019) found that bringing in family values and cultural background made WoC stronger leaders. They noted that WoC leaders made decisions that not only factored in aspects like institutional viability and financial stability but also how their actions potentially impact students and community members. In our work, we extend the ability for Latina presidents to bring different experiences and value systems to institutions

that have historically been led by white men and show how they can thrive as their whole selves despite not fitting previous notions of what a “CEO” is.

7.3. Recommendation 1: Seeing and Valuing Cultural Intuition as a Presidential Asset

To increase the representation of Latina presidents, we recommend a cultural and systemic shift to value Latina leaders who tap into their cultural intuition as a valid source of strength and knowledge in the field of higher education. Latina presidents are reflective of the students and the broader community they serve, often coming from community colleges or marginalized communities themselves. They bring their personal, professional, and cultural values of being rooted in community, family, and equity into their spaces, and that needs to be encouraged and supported throughout their time in the institution. Latina presidents are severely underrepresented in California Community Colleges compared to their share of student enrollment in the system. As far as actionable items, we recommend creating and maintaining mentorship and other professional development programs for Latina leaders to get into higher education, find a community to guide them, and opportunities for growth and career progression. Similarly, we need community college district boards and trustee members, who initiate presidential searches and select finalists, to see the value in leading with cultural intuition and hiring Latina leaders who bring novel approaches to the role.

7.4. Recommendation 2: Creating and Sustaining Environments for Latina Leaders

In the California Community Colleges, where this study is situated, only 11% of administrator roles were held by Latinas compared to 46% of their white counterparts (Mize, 2022). Additionally, Latinas comprised only 6% of community college presidents (Mize, 2022). The findings from this study provide insight into the everyday oppression faced by Latina presidents, as well as the persistence to continue. While many of our study collaborators find purpose and solace in serving predominantly Students of Color populations, Latinas struggle with a sense of belonging as administrators on an organizational level. Because WoC are underrepresented in leadership roles, Latinas often experience a heightened sense of visibility on campus and, thus, more significant pressure to redefine leadership for themselves and the broader communities they serve. In response to this hypervisibility, Latina presidents feel inclined to build upon their community by analyzing their campuses’ hiring practices and culture to ensure the success of equity-minded Leaders of Color. We highlight the cultural wealth that Latinas bring to campuses in creating sustainable policies and practices despite institutional pressures. System and campus leaders need to intentionally create policies, structures, and environments where Latinas specifically, and WoC broadly, can thrive as authentic leaders. If WoC leaders are brought into the CEO role without shifting the institutional landscape, we may just be subjecting them to harsh conditions that devalue their personal experience and make it difficult to lead as new models of Presidential possibility. We argue that creating equitable institutions that serve minoritized students is greatly limited when Latinas and other WoCs cannot bring their authentic selves to their roles as presidents.

8. Conclusions

When provided the opportunity, Latinas use their power to redefine leadership in ways that are student-centered and equity-oriented. Using their cultural intuition as a guide, Latinas seek out avenues to institute change for marginalized students, identifying community colleges as ideal institutions for such endeavors. As such, this paper serves as a reminder and call to action to highlight and place value on the leadership qualities that Latinas bring into their roles. Without their perspectives and unique approaches

to leading, community colleges and other higher education institutions will continue to reproduce the same tired and inefficient policies and practices that centralize whiteness, encourage assimilation, and minimize Latina ways of knowing and leading (Elenes, 2020; González, 2022; Eddy et al., 2015). May the narratives of Dra. Lopez, Aguilar, Vasquez, Medina, and Espinoza serve as a model for present and future Latina leaders to draw on their cultural intuition to lead with authenticity, actively resist norms defined by white men, and pave the way for other marginalized communities to thrive in the community college.

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