

Lived experience, power that a degree cannot give you: a phenomenological study of one Hispanic woman leader in academia

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Abstract:

Introduction: Structural racism, bias, and discrimination within institutions of higher education prevent Hispanic women from becoming university leaders and professors, especially when they do not have a formal degree. Hispanic leaders in higher education often have lived experiences based on their cultural values, family connections, and time working in community settings. However, lived experience is not always viewed as an equal qualification to college degrees when it comes to teaching, leading, or managing programs and departments.

Methods: The purpose of this study is to present a case study of one program operations director (leader) working at a University who does not have a terminal or advanced degree but holds the lived and professional experiences of working in community health worker programs with minority and underserved populations. This study examined her experience as a Hispanic female leading in higher education. We used qualitative phenomenological methods grounded in a descriptive case study design to inform our work.

Results: The themes from the analysis process represent how LE influences the participant's work as a leader in academia and give insight into how she navigates academia without a college degree.

Discussion: Higher education must meet the needs of Hispanic students and leaders. By elevating Hispanic women in leadership positions, even without degrees, institutions of higher education are demonstrating a commitment to Hispanic student support, development, diversity, and culture.

Keywords: lived experience | Hispanic | academia | minority | institutions

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Lived experience, power that a degree cannot give you: a phenomenological study of one Hispanic woman leader in academia

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Introduction: Structural racism, bias, and discrimination within institutions of higher education prevent Hispanic women from becoming university leaders and professors, especially when they do not have a formal degree. Hispanic leaders in higher education often have lived experiences based on their cultural values, family connections, and time working in community settings. However, lived experience is not always viewed as an equal qualification to college degrees when it comes to teaching, leading, or managing programs and departments.

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Discussion: Higher education must meet the needs of Hispanic students and leaders. By elevating Hispanic women in leadership positions, even without degrees, institutions of higher education are demonstrating a commitment to Hispanic student support, development, diversity, and culture.

KEYWORDS

lived experience, Hispanic, academia, minority, institutions

Background

Structural racism, bias, and discrimination within institutions of higher education prevent Hispanic women from becoming university leaders and professors, especially when they do not have a formal degree (Marrero-Lopez, 2015; Inglebriston, 2019). Only 16% of academic senior program leaders are minorities, and very few are Hispanic women (Bridges et al., 2007; Montas-Hunter, 2012). Hispanic individuals occupy just 3% of faculty positions (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2021), and Hispanic women in higher education represent just 2% of faculty and leadership positions (Bonomi, 2020). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics underscores this lack of Latinas in academia, with slow progress; in 1991, Latinas represented <1% of all full-time faculty, and in 2019, this increased to just 2.6% (Abraído-Lanza et al., 2022). The lack of diverse representation of Latinas is due to systemic and longstanding inequities. While educational attainment among Hispanic women has grown substantially over the last several decades, higher education attainment still falls behind that of white women. Across the United States, 51% of White women have a graduation degree, which is nearly double that of Hispanic women at 27% (American Community Survey, 2018). This further limits the likelihood of a Hispanic woman in positions of leadership within academic institutions, despite cultural, social, and contextual knowledge of the community and settings within which many academic institutions work.

There are initiatives in place, such as the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics, to improve the pipeline to education and increase degree attainment among Hispanic adults (The White House, 2021), which, in turn, would expand the opportunity for Hispanic adults in positions of leadership within academia. However, these processes can be slow. Furthermore, it still emphasizes that Hispanic women participate and have to engage in a system that emphasizes Euro-American priorities and values long-embedded in institutional norms, epistemologies, ontologies, policies, and processes. Thus, inadvertently, advanced degree requirements in universities continue to increase racial inequity in positions of leadership within academic institutions (Urietta et al., 2015). Moreover, financial, familial, and contextual factors persist the impact of an individual's ability to pursue higher education, especially among underrepresented minority populations such as Hispanics (Hiraldo, 2010).

The term academic colonialism is often used as a broad term to capture structural racism and discrimination against minority groups. While beyond the scope of this study, racism is pervasive in academia and has significant implications for all minority groups (Hiraldo, 2010). For example, oppression, marginalization, racism, sexism, segregation, academic colonialism, and the lack of opportunity create conditions where it is difficult for Hispanic women to succeed as administrators and program directors in higher education institutions (Southard, 1997; Carrillo and Dean, 2020). Some have described racism in US higher education as a wolf in sheep's clothing (de la Luz Reyes and Halcón, 2011). Other research studies have found that the value and reward systems of Hispanic leaders in higher education and institutions are in conflict; values of community, culture, and family are often replaced by white-dominant cultural norms and values (Rodríguez et al., 2016).

Lived experience

Lived experience (LE) is defined differently across the literature. One definition of LE often used in mental health, and substance abuse discipline is personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people (Oxford Reference, 2022). The term lived experience (LE) is often used to describe personal

knowledge that comes from direct experiences as opposed to representations or understandings that come from academic endeavors. LE has been widely used in the fields of social work to uplift the types of knowledge and expertise that come from living via direct experience, as opposed to knowledge and expertise derived from academic degrees, certifications, and authorities (O'Leary and Tsui, 2022). Increasingly, institutions recognize the value of LE as the equivalent of degrees, especially in certain disciplines, such as community-based health programs that serve underrepresented and underserved populations. Examples of individuals with LE have been placed in community health positions that typically require academic training or terminal degrees include:

- Cultural teachers and educators in treatment programs
- Peer recovery support specialists in the recovery and treatment programs
- Community-based researchers and community educators
- Traditional medicine healers and shaman
- Language teachers
- History teachers

Hispanic leaders in higher education often have LE based on their cultural values, family connections, and time working in community settings. LE has the power to fundamentally change how programs within academia are designed, implemented, and evaluated. However, LE is not always viewed as an equal qualification to college degrees when it comes to teaching, leading, or managing programs and departments. A key issue in balancing power between terminal degrees and LE is minority status (race, sexual gender minority, and others). Previous research demonstrates that individuals belonging to minority status groups experience discrimination, racism, and difficulty getting academic leadership positions (Urietta et al., 2015). Moreover, when an individual is a double or triple minority (Hispanic, woman, and no formal degree), there are even greater impacts; some call this the double minority effect or double impact (Powell et al., 2022). University human resource departments have diverse approaches when considering LE, and most do not include LE-based personal knowledge and experience (University of New Mexico, 2010). Further and wider work on the issue of LE must be initiated to fully explore practices, policies, and procedures related to LE in academia.

Degree, pay, and power

Lived experience without a degree is more commonly substituted for support staff and or administrative positions within universities. University departments often have specific formal education requirements or equivalent experience, but no university, that we are aware of, advances individuals in leadership positions without stating a specific educational requirement. Typically, academic institutions promote individuals with terminal degrees, placing them in positions of power and prestige (Urietta et al., 2015). Individuals without terminal degrees are not promoted in the same way. Limited literature documents the number of people in academic leadership positions without terminal or advanced degrees. Most job postings within academic institutions include preferred qualifications and experience; for example, a posting for an Operations Program Director at a

university has minimum job requirements of a Master's degree with at least 5 years of experience directly related to the duties of the position or a Bachelor's degree with at least 7 years of experience. While universities may have different requirements for director and leadership positions, it is rare to find an individual without a degree in a leadership position. Pay is also a topic reviewed based on the degree status and years of experience, but there is no equity when it comes to paying for individuals in leadership positions without a degree. Since there is limited literature on the topic of pay, lived experience, and degree status in academia, we spoke to a program manager at a Hispanic-serving university. We found that individuals hired without a formal degree or the degree required for their job have difficulty moving up the pay grade ladder, even when they are doing the same or more work than others in the same positions with a degree. When individuals without a degree in academia attempt to advocate for themselves, higher pay, and fair and equitable treatment, they often face institutional barriers and judgment by human resources for not having a degree and are called "troublemakers." In sum, the combination of being a Hispanic woman in an academic leadership position without a degree is an interesting phenomenon that requires additional investigation.

About the university

The University is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in the southwest. The University includes 11,235 Hispanic students, which is 41% of the total University population (University of New Mexico, 2020). Approximately 14% of the University faculty are Hispanic (Gonzales, 2012), and within certain programs such as the School of Medicine, 13% of the faculty are Hispanic, and 51% are female (University of New Mexico, 2017). University data on Hispanic program directors, degree status, and gender are not publicly reported. The University categorizes experience based on compensated or uncompensated work. University policies about LE, as a substitution for education based on previous experience, are categorized as full-time employment, part-time employment, student employment, practicum, and volunteer experience (University of New Mexico, 2010). However, these categories fail to recognize how the personal LE of applicants is viewed as a substitute for education within university hiring policies for academic and staff positions. University policies do not ask applicants about their experiences as they relate to the positions for which they are being hired, and this fails to value and uphold the legitimacy of lived experience as a key building block in knowledge formation and understanding.

Method

The purpose of this study is to present a case study of one program operations director (leader) working at a University who does not have a terminal or advanced degree but holds the lived and professional experiences of working in community health worker programs with minority and underserved populations. This study examined her experience as a Hispanic female leading in higher education. The following two research questions guided our study: (1) What is it like to be a leader in academia without a college degree? (2)

What are some challenges and recommendations for universities as they consider LE and degree status?

Research design

We used qualitative phenomenological methods grounded in a descriptive case study design to inform our work. Phenomenological studies facilitate the understanding from the participant's perspective rather than the researcher's perspective. Here, the goal is to explore, inquire, and understand lived experiences in a specific context and space (Yin, 2003). Notably, phenomenological studies are not designed to generalize experiences or emotions. Moreover, following published recommendations on qualitative descriptive case study design, the object of the study is a specific, unique, and bounded system (Hyett et al., 2014). The theoretical framework, guiding this study, was Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCRT). In brief, LatCrit guides the understanding of the experiences and phenomenon, concerning immigration status, language, ethnicity, and culture (Perez Huber, 2010), and acknowledges the racialized experiences of individuals in higher education. CRT tells us that racism is normal and ordinary in the United States (US); race as a social construction informs the racialized experiences of people of color and race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion and must be acknowledged (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010).

Positionality

Consistent with the phenomenological approach, we (the authors) are the primary sources in the research process. We acknowledge our own subjectivity and bias. We are health workers with a vision for health equity. Our ancestors come from different countries, with different cultures, values, and traditions, but our vision is the same. We are dedicated to health, we care deeply about future generations, and we value integrity, mentoring, hard work, and diversity. Our team includes three heterosexual-identified Hispanic women and one heterosexual white woman. We shared our own perspectives, positions, and biases throughout the research process. Two of us navigated academic colonialism throughout our undergraduate and graduate careers, and another navigated sexism as a graduate and doctoral student. Our team met regularly, and we journaled and practiced reflection to understand what this process meant based on our own lived experiences. Three authors are bilingual (Spanish-English), and the last author is not. She worked with the other authors to review and create an interview guide that was centered on LE and the Hispanic culture. Before we started this research, we knew very little about published literature and the concept of LE in academia.

Selection, procedures, and participant

The strategy for participant selection was based on qualitative research method recommendations, where the focus was on the quality of the data rather than the quantity (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). Most phenomenological studies use a sample size of 1–20 participants, and we selected one based on data quality. Following the

Office of Human Research Protections guidelines, an external reviewer within the institution determined this study to be exempted from IRB. We selected the participant based on her LE and position in academia without a degree, and she was the only participant who met the criteria. We explained the nature of the research to her and scheduled a Zoom meeting for the interview. Before the interview started, we received verbal consent and explained the purpose of the interview. Our semi-structured interview guide included six questions. The interview lasted for 27 min.

Sources of data

The primary source of data for this research was the recorded semi-structured interview. Questions were open-ended and designed to explore the phenomenon of LE. The interview questions were as follows:

- 1 Can you tell me a story about your career path journey and how you got to where you are today?
- 2 How did cultural values shape your cultural upbringing, and did your own values shape your career journey to get where you are today?
- 3 How important is it to you as a leader in bringing your ethnic identity and heritage and those values into the workplace?
- 4 Can you tell me about the challenges you have faced as a Hispanic woman of color without a degree but with much LE?
- 5 How do you feel your lived experience prepared you to become successful in your role at the academic institution and as a community leader?
- 6 What specific advice do you have for healthcare systems, organizations, and academia to create more inclusive roles for those who have LE versus a degree?

The interview was transcribed using Otter.ai and reviewed by the team.

Data analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological methods guided the analysis process, as shown in Table 1.

The team reviewed the transcribed data in a Word document first and listened to the audio recordings. We recognized that our personal biases and own LE could impact the themes identified in the data. To counter this bias, we practiced reflectivity, where we discussed themes that emerged. Bracketing, journaling, and reflection occurred throughout the analysis process. In this process, we found trustworthiness and credibility in the data; we felt and observed the interview data in a similar way.

The fourth author identified significant statements about LE and explored what it is like to be a Hispanic leader in academia without a degree and clustered meanings into themes using a CRT lens (Perez Huber, 2010). The fourth author then shared these statements and meanings with the team. The two guiding research questions, "What is it like?" and "How do you do it?" helped the team identify the essence of LE in academia as a Hispanic woman without a degree. Throughout this entire process, we met as a team, discussed what

TABLE 1 Phenomenological methods and application.

Colaizzi's step	Application to present study
1 Familiarization	Familiarize team with data, read transcripts, listen to recording
2 Identify significant statements	Statement identification, relevance to the phenomenon under review
3 Formulating meanings	Team identifies meanings as they related to the phenomenon of LE, team brackets ideas, biases, positions.
4 Clustering themes	Team clusters meanings into themes. Bracketing continues, CRT lens.
5 Developing description	Team writes complete description of LE phenomenon
6 Create structure	Team creates description and statement that captures phenomenon of LE
7 Seek verification of structure	Team shares description and statements with individual being interviewed, academic team. No modifications made.

we felt was significant, and agreed through collaborative consensus-building discussions. Through this process, we identified several themes that describe the phenomenon of interest.

Results

The themes from the analysis process represent how LE influences the participant's work as a leader in academia and give insight into how she navigates academia without a college degree. The themes are as follows:

- Ability to empathize
- Values, resilience, and self-efficacy
- Paving the way for others
- Challenges and recommendations

Ability to empathize

The ability to empathize and understand firsthand what it is to struggle and experience loss at a young age allows her to approach and lead her work at the university authentically and powerfully. After enduring a tragic car crash where her mother and grandfather passed away, she reflected on this experience, "[...]it just shaped our lives in a way of really thinking, 'Oh my gosh, we could become homeless at any time, we do not have enough food, where are we going to get our next meal.' So with all of that, in the moment, as a child, you are just thinking of survival, you are just thinking of every day, how you are going to survive, how you are going to move forward." Her early career work as a community health worker (CHW) gave her a deep understanding of the critical issues that her community was experiencing. "I became a community health worker working for the Department of Health. And because it was a small town [...]the role

that I had signed up to do was pretty much a jack of all trades, where people came in for their immunization record, they came in with domestic violence issues, or how to get a divorce. They would come in for sexually transmitted diseases. They were about to lose their home. So my job was really to help these individuals with resources. And even though it was very overwhelming, I quickly learned to love it." Empathy also comes from LE and being an expert of your own community, "The important thing about that profession, though, is that these are individuals, many of them who do not have a college education, who have a heart to serve, who know their communities very well, and know the systems, how to navigate them, in order to get services for their clients." She reflected on how empathy for others gives her a sense of purpose and motivation to continue the work. She shares "[the] reason I think I learned to love it so much is that it reminded me of my upbringing childhood, regarding how I would have wished that the services were available to my family, and that there would have been an individual in my community that we could have gotten to, for help and support. So that's how it started. And over the years, I've grown into becoming a leader and an advocate, and a strong supporter of the community health worker profession."

Values, resilience, and self-efficacy

Themes of resilience, self-efficacy, and personal values demonstrate how she navigates academic leadership without a college degree. Resiliency helped her stay strong when faced with adversity. Through deep reflection, she shared that "resiliency comes with a lot of tears, a lot of sweat, and there have been times where [she] wanted to give up and say maybe this is not for [her]. But again, [she] continues [s] to look in the mirror and say, 'I have to do this, I continue [s] to look in the mirror and say, 'I have to do this; I have value. I am smart. I have the lived experience that not very many people have; I can relate to people; I can relate to people; I can relate to people; I can relate to people.'" Her ability to champion her strengths, skills, and values keeps her driven and motivated to do the work. Resiliency also helped her overcome various challenges within the academic setting. For example, as she reflected on professional challenges, she shared "the values of being strong and knowing that I was going to face a lot of challenges because of the way I look, the way I speak. The way I even walk the way I do my hair. It wasn't going to be easy."

Recognizing strength in vulnerability helped her navigate academia because she felt a sense of pride in what she had to overcome to be successful. She states, "I should be proud of the work I have done, the experiences that I have gone through in life that have not been easy. I'm going to be something bigger and stronger and demonstrate that people like myself can overcome." Her cultural and family values also shaped her self-efficacy. She shares that "Both of [her] parents were immigrants to the United States. They're both from Mexico. And their vision mission was always to create a better life for themselves for [their] family. [They had...] family values, very much driven by education. [They] came to this country to succeed." As a leader, she relies on her family and cultural values to stay motivated and focused, even when challenges come up, "I bring my own ethnic background where our values growing up, was really about, you know, working hard, giving it always 110%, not settling for 100%. But always going the extra mile. My mother wanted to be a business owner, so she was

very driven. That's where that comes from. That's what I bring to the table."

Paving the way for others

A value and theme throughout the interview are that her work and LE are about paving the way for others, mentoring them, and sharing in generosity, humility, and culture. Her values, resilience, and self-efficacy shape how she approaches leadership, "It's not just about me succeeding, but how do I bring the people that look like me, that is the same skin color that speaks Spanish, that struggled, how do I bring them alongside me, and they also become leaders. So it's been a combination of my own upbringing, struggles, challenges, how my parents raised me, and how I wanted to carry out my mother's vision to see us succeed."

Mentorship contributed to her success. She expressed deep appreciation and generosity for mentorship along her journey, and this appreciation is at the core of her desire to pave the path for others. These mentors held positions of power and terminal degrees within the academy and advocated for her, "some of them have been doctors, people in power in, in leadership roles that have been able to advocate and justify to human services and powers to be to say, you know, what this woman does have value. She's smart; we need people like her to lead programs like this. And we are gonna stand beside her to help and coach her. So their bravery, their willingness to invest in me and have trust that I wasn't going to let them down."

Mentors also supported her through various personal and professional challenges within the academy, "So I was driven, and she coached me and mentored me and read everything that I would write and critiqued it, and it was my responsibility to become a better writer. So something as simple as that. Others would be like, you know, you have your life experience, and that trauma that you carry with you needs to be processed. And what I mean by that is that you know, maybe I had a hard day that day, and it would bring up stuff from my past. Sometimes, I just needed to talk to them about it, not that they were my therapist, but just somebody that talked to say, "You know what, it's okay." You do not, it's separate, separate that from what you are doing now, or it's okay to cry, but you know what you cry, and let us move on. So, just unpacking all the trauma that you bring with you, that comes with lived experience alone."

Lived experience is at the core of how she paves the way for others in the academy and in the communities that she works with. "I've lived or experienced similar things that some of the clients we serve now have gone through. And even though it looks different, I could relate."

Advocacy and reflection are part of the mentoring process. She inspires others to see value within themselves just as other people inspired her, "[...] they tell me they are like we saw something in you that you were going to be a leader and we wanted to help and support you. And it comes from little things that they would do."

Challenges and recommendations

LE is not valued as much as it should be, and this is a challenge. "In my experience, I do not have my Bachelor's, I do not have my master's, and I do not have my doctorate, and many times, because of the work I do, people assume that I have those degrees. And it's great,

I'm glad they value that. But then when they find out I do not, some people see it as like, wow, you have overcome, and there's a lot that you have done, and others, you could see that I'm devalued because what am I bringing to the table, that, you know, they have worked so hard to work on their masters or their Ph.D." Similarly, without a degree, being a Hispanic woman is difficult and requires constant vigilance, "I just know that I have to be very careful, thoughtful around how everything is managed because it will get questioned when you do not have a degree or a doctorate or the skin color, you look different." Within academic institutions, it is essential that advocacy for LE is embedded into programs and pipelines, "It's really important that we continue to advocate and say, look, they need livable wages. And as a leader that runs community health worker programs, I need to make sure our people can afford health insurance, that their lived experience, whether they have a felony, or they are on probation, that we are able to get them hired through our system. So for me, it's being equitable in that way that we are valuing their experience, their value in an academic setting, and that we are paying for the great work that we do, which is not easy to do in a university setting."

Universities must bring individuals with LE into their programs to create and build internal and equitable processes. However, having sufficient resources makes this challenging, "We must make sure that we have enough resources for adequate training for everybody. That is just not a certain group that's getting trained and is getting an opportunity. But as an organization, we are looking at equitable practices, and that we bring our managers to the table to brainstorm what does health equity look like? We're also bringing our community health workers, that we are bringing our administrative side, and our budget people to all collectively have input around how we want to frame this with the lens of never losing sight of health equity. What does that look like? And they are framing it. They're creating an institution, actually an organization that is looking at health equity, but also driven by social change and social justice."

A paradigm shift is needed to explore who holds knowledge and power and who speaks for marginalized and oppressed communities. It is often not the individuals with terminal degrees, "[...]so are individuals who have gone through these similar experiences. And they should be at the table alongside others that make decisions that are changing our healthcare system, that want to improve better outcomes for all humanity. We should be at the table, and our voice should be valued." Not all university programs are conducive to family values and single motherhood, "...we need spaces where, you know, sometimes I do not have childcare, sometimes I have to leave and pick up my kids that we create environments where people can still be successful single mothers, your car breaks down that we have spaces for people to continue to be able to be employed, and that we work around those life challenges for you to be successful. Because with lived experience with all the stuff that I talked about, it's not a perfect world, and we need those spaces to be successful."

Discussion

The underrepresentation of Latina populations in academia illuminates the persistent problem of underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority groups in positions of power and prestige (Abraido-Lanza et al., 2022). While universities strive for equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice, they have failed to recognize

what LE gives university applicants beyond what degrees confer. The power of LE is that it has the potential to fundamentally change how individuals perceive the world, assign meaning to life experiences, and connect with others (Francis, 2017). In this study, the participant's life changed completely at the age of 13 years with the tragic loss of her mother and grandfather. This traumatic experience allowed her to connect with and empathize with people who are going through similar situations. Empathy has been identified as one of the most important skills of leaders (Herink, 2021). Empathetic leaders show compassion, have loyalty, and give insight and understanding to their team and the people they serve (Gentry et al., 2016). Resilience within organizations and leaders is an essential ingredient for Hispanic, serving institutions and leaders. Previous research shows that resilience embodies being career-driven, mentorship, self-reflection, and strong relationships while addressing institutional racism (Sanchez-Zamora, 2013). Mentoring was a primary theme in this study, and this is similar to the literature, where there is value based on time spent with the mentee, commitment, guidance, and listening (Estep et al., 2017). In this study, advocacy and skill development were significant parts of the mentoring process. These two themes are recommended in previous literature on faculty development (Guanipa et al., 2003; Estep et al., 2017). Although there is limited literature that explores the phenomenon of LE in academic leadership positions, this is time that we consider what this could look like.

To begin, research is necessary that explores the experiences of Latinas in academia, including their parents, close family members, relatives, and children. In addition to formal degrees, trust is paramount to building the capacity of institutions to value LE in Latinas. Political climates in the US ebb and flow, threatening the livelihood of undocumented immigrants and Latinas. Imagine what could happen if these narratives and experiences could be used to change conditions, reverse power, and decolonize the process of navigating leadership in academia without a degree. Next, structural factors must be addressed to create equitable conditions for Latinas in academia, including those with LE over a degree. Although some progress has been made, women still receive fewer research grants than men and are historically awarded less to conduct research (Shen, 2013). Topics such as scholarship, publication, and ensure must be explored fully to identify areas of greatest benefit for equity in academia. Other authors cite the importance of leadership programs, pay and service quality analysis, revisiting metrics for success, and leadership accountability. After Combining, these topics could elevate LE as a credible knowledge base while creating paths of equity for Latinas and other underrepresented groups in academia.

Limitations

While this study has multiple strengths, there are a few limitations that should be noted based on the phenomenological case study design. First, the study is bounded by one university-based community health worker program and lived experience of an individual in that program in a leadership position. This descriptive case study is not generalizable to other academic or community settings, and construction of validity, reliability, external validity, and reliability should be noted. A single case study analysis represents one case (Yin, 2003), and the study is based on 27 min of data from one participant. Even with these limitations in mind, this case study adds an in-depth, context-specific, holistic documentation of LE in academic leadership without a degree.

Conclusion

Higher education must meet the needs of Hispanic students and leaders. By elevating Hispanic women in leadership positions, even without degrees, institutions of higher education are demonstrating a commitment to Hispanic student support, development, diversity, and culture (Rodríguez et al., 2016). Part of addressing inequities and inequalities among underserved populations in the US is understanding that a degree does not mean someone is capable or qualified to lead (Carnes and Lupu, 2015). A degree just represents a process and is a certificate of moving through a colonial educational system, where Western concepts and ideals are valued more than others. Advocates for Critical Race Theory (CRT) and equity are calling for ending systemic racism in the academy, addressing institutional barriers in the culture and climate, and human resource policies that present major obstacles to minority populations, including Hispanic women without degrees where their voice should be heard in all phases, places, and ideas (Johnson, 2020). For nearly 400 years, higher education and the academy have failed to address systemic racism or consider the value of LE in leadership positions (Southard, 1997). Although the field of CRT has encouraged academic leaders to engage individuals with LE more than they have historically, more work needs to be done. Here, the following four recommendations are for academic institutions hiring individuals with LE as the equivalent of a terminal degree: (1) equity in hiring and pay based on lived experience and degree status; (2) address systemic racism in higher education, that is, change policies that keep individuals without a degree from advancing in academia; (3) understand and acknowledge that a terminal degree does not mean someone is competent, qualified, or empathetic, and (4) update hiring policies and procedures to reflect LE equivalents in addition to other types of experience substitutions for degrees required. It is time to reconsider power, LE, and diversity within academia. If we fail to consider LE, we are at risk of perpetuating colonial education systems, where degrees, status, and whiteness prevail.

Author's note

The term Hispanic and Latino/a are used throughout this paper, but they are different, Hispanic and Latino refer to two different, partially overlapping groups:

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Hispanic refers to a person with ancestry from a country whose primary language is Spanish.

Latino and its variations refer to a person with origins from anywhere in Latin America (Mexico, South and Central America) and the Caribbean.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

MP and AK contributed to conception and design of the study. AK, AC, and KM collected and analyzed the data. VC validated results. AK wrote the first draft of the manuscript. AC and KM wrote sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

AK, KM, and AC were employed by Allyson Kelley & Associates PLLC.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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