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## Opinion Editorial: Misclassification: The Power of Language in Hispanic Serving Institution Designations

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## **Misclassification: The Power of Language in Hispanic Serving Institution Designations**

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With modern innovations like the internet, we are coming to live in a society that is more globally engaged. In this way, students are more aware of other cultural traditions and customs than ever before. This shift in the structure of American society and education has given rise to the idea of cultural competence, or understanding and working with individuals from diverse beliefs systems, backgrounds, and traditions. Thus, institutions of higher education have placed an increased importance on instilling this value in their students. However, even with these great strides, there is still much work to be done.

As a White man with no cultural heritage in any Spanish speaking countries, I do not know if I would be the best candidate to reinvent the Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) designation, but something must be done to make it more culturally specific and accurate. Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) are a necessity in American society, as they provide a safe, nurturing environment for students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to celebrate their heritage. The term MSI is an official designation made by the United States government which provides additional funding and resources granted that the institution meets certain criteria. In this way, the government helps to create an environment where these minority groups can thrive. Some of the criterion that are used can be very problematic, as they misclassify or misrepresent population demographics. In this instance, the designation of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) actually creates a conundrum.

For an institution to be designated as an HSI, they must be accredited, 25% of their students must identify as Latin@, and 50% of that population must be designated as low income. The problem with this set of criteria is that Latin@ and Hispanic are used interchangeably to represent anyone whose heritage is located in a Spanish speaking country. However, contemporary society is coming to view these two categories as distinctly different. Hispanic often refers to those who have cultural heritage in Spain while Latin@ are indicative of people whose origins lie in Latin America. Therefore, it would seem with these criteria that HSIs are actually Latin@ serving institutions and would do little for the population that considers themselves Hispanic. Furthermore, it could be offensive to use these terms interchangeably as the only real commonality between all of these subgroups is a language that varies heavily by location. Additionally, there are students who may not identify with either category and instead identify as White or Black when their cultural heritage lies in Colombia. Forcing students to self-identify with overarching and potentially inaccurate categories will only skew demographic

statistics and cause institutions to miss opportunities to meet the criteria for HSI designation.

Additionally, HSIs also lack certain criteria that are required of other minority serving institutions, which could be beneficial to serving this population. One of the distinct criterion for Asian American and Pacific Islander serving institutions is that they create a five-year action plan for the development and improvement of that population on campus. However, HSIs are only judged by the demographic that attend even though they could benefit from the implementation of such planning. Strategic plans could also be a powerful marketing tool to attract more students to the institution. Having a direction to facilitate the development of the Hispanic and Latin@ population could only have positive outcomes for the institution.

Overall, the language used by the HSI designation is exclusive and innately inaccurate. Depending on a student's perception of their own identity, they may declare themselves to be a different racial group altogether. It would seem about time to change the name and criteria of the HSI designation to something that can truly benefit the institutions and populations it's meant to serve. If we as educators are trying to encourage our students to become more culturally competent, we should model that behavior, and make sure the language we use is inclusive and accurate.

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