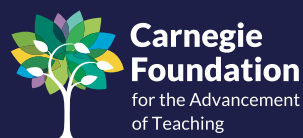




Reclaiming Higher Education as an Open Door to Collective Prosperity

Anne-Marie Núñez and Edwin Perez

Diana Natalicio Institute for Hispanic Student
Success at The University of Texas, El Paso



About the Carnegie Classifications White Papers

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (ACE) partnered in February 2022 to reimagine the future of the Carnegie Classifications. As part of this collaboration, the Carnegie Foundation and ACE are working to develop new and refined versions of the classifications that better reflect the public purpose, mission, focus, and impact of higher education.

An aspect of this work involves learning from experts about key topics that can inform future methodological and data decisions. The Carnegie Classifications White Papers series aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and research about the impact of the historic Basic Classification, areas of consideration for a new Social and Economic Mobility Classification, and the role of classification systems. The analysis and takeaways from these papers provide guidance for potential updates. All released white papers can be found at carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu.

Reimagining the Carnegie Classifications is made possible by a cohort of funders that are dedicated to utilizing the classifications to help postsecondary education advance students' social and economic mobility through learner-centered outcomes. Partners include ECMC Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Imaginable Futures, the Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and Strada Education Foundation as well as a donor who wishes to remain anonymous.



ACE and the American Council on Education are registered marks of the American Council on Education and may not be used or reproduced without the express written permission of ACE.

American Council on Education
One Dupont Circle NW
Washington, DC 20036

© 2026. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Overview

Broad-access institutions, particularly Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), are often relegated to the margins of higher education discourse despite playing a foundational role in advancing economic mobility, STEM opportunity, and societal well-being. At a moment of heightened scrutiny of U.S. higher education, public discourse and policy debate continue to center a narrow set of elite institutions, obscuring the colleges and universities that educate the majority of students and sustain the nation's workforce and innovation capacity. Recent efforts, such as the Carnegie Classification's new Student Access and Earnings Classification, signal a growing recognition that higher education must be evaluated by whom it serves and how it advances opportunity, rather than metrics focused on selectivity, rankings, and endowment size. This evolving emphasis on access and outcomes highlights the need for research that examines how broad-access institutions like HSIs construct and expand opportunities through their institutional practices and commitments.

Building on this need, this paper examines how HSIs bring opportunity to life through intentional organizational practices undergirded by opportunity-centered logics—embedded assumptions and values that guide organizational behavior—that prioritize inclusivity, talent development, and community responsiveness (Núñez 2024). Drawing on a multiple-case study of a national network of HSI computing departments, the authors show how these logics result in expanding opportunity through redesigning pathways into computing, building multidimensional supports, and creating environments where students are actively included and supported. Through this analysis, the authors argue that HSIs are exemplars of how higher education can be (re)structured to serve as a catalyst for collective prosperity, offering important lessons for institutional change at a moment when higher education's public purpose is increasingly contested.

Social and Institutional Context

The discourse surrounding U.S. higher education is profoundly skewed. It is dominated by a narrow focus on the most selective institutions—those that command headlines, court cases, and rankings. This elite-centric narrative distorts public understanding and policy priorities, obscuring the broader institutional landscape that serves the vast majority of students.

This distortion reaches far beyond the halls of academia. It has real consequences for how we design, fund, and evaluate higher education as a whole. It reinforces a system that rewards exclusivity over inclusion, prestige over purpose, and research dollars over real-world impact. Current political scrutiny, government orders, and court cases that threaten freedom of scholarship and public support of higher education aim to erode these historical norms. Together, these trends are undermining one of the most powerful engines of collective prosperity the U.S. has ever built.

This imbalance in discourse is not just a matter of media portrayal. It reflects deeper structural inequities in how we define excellence, value, and success in higher education. When we center our attention on exclusivity, we marginalize the institutions that are doing the hard, often invisible work of expanding opportunity, especially for students from communities that historically had less access to higher education.

The truth is that the U.S. higher education system is not a monolith. It is a vast, complex, and dynamic system, unique in the world in that it services the mass, not just elite, population. For generations, it has provided the foundation for developing the nation's skilled workforce and stands out as a leading reason the U.S. economy has led the world in innovation and growth for decades.

Reframing the Narrative of Higher Education as a System for Prosperity

To reclaim higher education's role as an institution that provides an open door to opportunity, we must reframe how we assess its value and success. The new Student Access and Earnings Classification from the Carnegie Classifications, with its identification of Opportunity Colleges and Universities (OCUs), is a critical step in this direction. It shifts the focus from inputs (selectivity, research funding, endowment size) to outcomes that matter—who is being served and how their lives are being transformed. This reframing moves toward institutionalizing access and opportunity by creating new incentives, new norms, and new forms of recognition for colleges and universities that prioritize mobility, student success, and community impact. It challenges us to ask different questions: who is being served, empowered, and transformed and under what circumstances?

The vast majority of American students are not attending Ivy League schools, as demonstrated by the fact that Ivy League students accounted for fewer than 1 percent of total undergraduate enrollment in the fall of 2022 (Pardue 2024). In fact, even when expanding the pool to all highly selective four-year institutions—those admitting 25 percent or fewer—these campuses still only enroll about 6 percent of all undergraduate students (Arum et al. 2023). So, where are most American students enrolled? Among those attending four-year universities, 56 percent are enrolled in institutions that admit at least three-quarters of their applicants (Arum et al. 2023). Across the full undergraduate landscape, approximately 30 percent are enrolled in two-year colleges (NCES 2023). These patterns underscore that broad-access institutions are not peripheral but central to the nation's economic future and societal well-being. Many of these institutions are also Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), which graduate disproportionately high shares and numbers of STEM graduates from low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized communities in the U.S. (NASSEM 2019).

Rendering these institutions invisible in the discourse on higher education has consequences. It allows critics to paint higher education as elitist, out of touch, and irrelevant to the lives of ordinary Americans. It fuels skepticism about the value of college and undermines public support for institutions that are, in fact, deeply embedded in the fabric of their communities and tightly connected to the success and prosperity of the people they serve.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Exemplars of Economic and Social Mobility

For many years, the authors have studied and worked in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)—those designated by the federal government as enrolling at least 25 percent full-time undergraduate Hispanic students—and experienced first-hand how they are paving student success pathways. Although operating with fewer institutional resources than other higher education institutions, research consistently shows that HSIs punch well above their weight in promoting economic and social mobility for their graduates. For instance, analyses from the Rutgers Center for Minority-Serving Institutions (2024) demonstrate that HSIs enroll higher proportions of low-income students and use fewer resources than Predominantly White Institutions yet achieve comparable upward mobility rates. Work by Aguilar-Smith (2024) further highlights the economic value of HSIs, with price-to-earnings premium analyses indicating that among all postsecondary institutions, 48 percent of institutions where students recoup educational costs of their attendance within one year are HSIs. Furthermore, 77 percent of HSIs enable students to recover costs within five years.

HSIs are far more likely to be OCUs than other postsecondary institutions. Among all postsecondary institutions, HSIs are more than three times as likely as other institutions to be classified as OCUs. Four in ten OCUs that are four-year institutions are HSIs. Meanwhile, among institutions that are not HSIs, only one in 10 meet the criteria

for classification as OCUs. This growing body of evidence suggests that HSIs are compelling models for designing environments that produce meaningful economic opportunity, even when resources are limited, offering valuable lessons for how higher education can better serve broad student populations.

National data shows that HSIs play a critical role in forging STEM pathways. In 2018, nearly half (49 percent) of all Hispanic science and engineering bachelor's degree recipients earned their degrees from HSIs (NCSES 2021). This impact extends into graduate education, with about 40 percent of Hispanic doctorate recipients in computer and information science having completed their bachelor's degree at an HSI (NCSES 2021), underscoring the outsized role these institutions play in preparing the nation's STEM talent in high-demand fields like computing.

Learning from HSIs: Lessons from Two Decades of HSI Innovation in Computing

Our research has allowed us to witness the promise and potential of HSIs. We had the privilege of conducting studies on how the Computing Alliance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (CAHSI, n.d.), a large network of HSIs, broadens participation in computing fields. The network at the center of our research is unique; for over 20 years, its personnel have been committed to raising computing attainment at HSIs, investing considerable resources in doing so and partnering across its institutions to share effective strategies. Since 2000, network departments have not only graduated relatively high numbers and shares of Hispanic computing bachelor's degree recipients but have also increased their computing degree conferrals at a faster rate than the national aggregate for long-standing computer science and computer engineering departments—based on IPEDS comparisons from 2002–2017 (Villa et al. 2019). Computing fields, while lucrative in their labor market demand and earning potential, historically have been among the least accessible majors for students from underserved communities, due to factors such as inadequate availability of advanced level math instruction and computer courses in under-resourced high schools.

Through our research on how HSIs serve students who otherwise might not be able to pursue higher education, we have seen how institutions build bridges between education and work and between aspiration and opportunity. These institutions operate with different institutional logics than the exclusionary, elitist logics all too often portrayed by the media and politicians. These differing logics do not direct them to chase prestige and rankings; instead, they chase relevance and impact on the students that make up their institutions. They don't sort students; they support them. They design systems that are student-centered, contextually responsive, and engaged in the community. They build bridges and multiple on-ramps—not barriers—to student success.

Our research shows that these institutions tailor their strategies to meet students where they are—academically, socially, financially, and emotionally. They leverage partnerships, align resources, and create ecosystems of support that extend far beyond the classroom—to cocurricular clubs, paid leadership opportunities to build community with their peers, national computing conferences, and professional socialization and internships with industry professionals. And these HSIs don't do this work for accolades but because they believe in the transformative power of higher education on the lives of students and the ripple effect on generations to follow.

Opportunity-Centered Logics in Creating Climates of Student Success

One key takeaway from this research has been that these HSIs operate with what Núñez (2024) calls *opportunity-centered logics* as guiding assumptions to promote economic and social mobility. These findings are based on a qualitative multiple case study (Yin 2018) of four computer science departments that belong to the national network of HSIs.

The departments in this study were all housed in broadly accessible public HSIs and were selected for maximum variation, representing various geographic regions in the nation (i.e., north, southwest, and west). Núñez joined the network in 2018 to investigate how network departments' organizational behavior supports the computing success of Latinx and other minoritized students. In 2020, Núñez and her team conducted data collection at these sites, which resulted in over 100 interviews with executive and mid-level administrators, faculty, staff, and students; 69 observations of courses, professional clubs, faculty meetings, and network meetings; and extensive document analysis.

Leveraging this extensive dataset, Núñez and colleagues have published multiple pieces that speak to organizational behavior conducive to broad student success through examining culture, actions, and mindsets (see Núñez et al. 2021; Núñez 2022, 2023, 2024; Rivera & Núñez 2022; Rivera et al. 2024). At the root of these organizational behaviors were opportunity-centered institutional logics centered on *inclusivity*, *talent development*, and *community responsiveness* (Núñez, 2024). Administrators, faculty, and staff at these HSIs approached their work contrary to popular perceptions that all higher education institutions are laser-focused on logics of exclusion, competition, and prestige clinging. They operated from the perspective that the value of higher education lies not in its exclusivity but in its capacity to expand access, aspiration, and possibility. Below, we detail key findings and lessons on how opportunity-centered mindsets and behaviors can lead to broad and durable student success.

Inclusivity: Opening Doors, Not Narrowing Pathways

Top-level leaders at these institutions challenged dominant, elitist norms that say—in the words of one executive administrator—“access and excellence are mutually exclusive.” This norm was reflected in computing departments' accessibility to their students. Given that it is one of the most financially lucrative fields for college graduates and overall national demand to pursue computing fields is high, many departments around the country have a process to select students that is separate from the overall college admissions process. Due to what is in essence an exclusionary second admissions process, many college students who want to pursue computing fields cannot pursue their major of choice. By contrast, all of the HSI computing departments that the research team visited enrolled all students interested in the major—a true policy of inclusivity, even if this meant that their enrollments were high.

To further encourage students to pursue computing, faculty at these HSIs redesigned the introductory computer science course to remove math prerequisites, enabling students without prior exposure to computing to enter the major. One institution allowed students to begin the major while still enrolled in developmental English, challenging traditional sequencing that would have delayed or derailed their progress. In the words of one faculty member, “If the student can do the math and perform in my classes, what does it matter that they are still learning English?”

Further reinforcing a norm of inclusivity, faculty and administrators emphasized that teaching assistants (TAs) should act as “gateways, not filters,” and some departments trained TAs specifically in inclusive pedagogy. One instructor even brought food to every exam, recognizing that hunger was a barrier to performance for many students. Another institution developed an app to discreetly notify students of available donated food, reducing stigma. These examples illustrate how inclusivity is not just a value—it is operationalized in course design, advising, and strategies that support the whole student.

Talent Development: Believing in Students' Potential

Institutional personnel at these HSIs emphasized the importance of their own collective roles to support student development. Faculty across the four HSIs rejected deficit-based assumptions about students from underserved backgrounds. One administrator said, “Never confuse our students with where they come from.” Another faculty member noted, “If I don’t do the research, there are a million other people who could. But if I fail to give advice to the student, there aren’t a million others who will.” Many effective research faculty emphasized that teaching students and seeing students grow was the most meaningful part of their work.

Departments created zero-credit research methods courses open to all STEM students regardless of GPA and emphasized passion and commitment over grades when selecting students for research opportunities. Faculty described their work as an ethical responsibility—akin to a doctor’s oath—to support students’ growth and mobility. Faculty, administrators, and staff emphasized that it was a collective responsibility of theirs to develop, learn, and implement approaches to cultivate student success, reflecting a prioritization of their own talent development as well.

Community Responsiveness: Affirming Students’ Backgrounds, Building Belonging

Community responsiveness, which includes understanding students’ and families’ cultural backgrounds, was evident in both formal and informal practices. Because many of the students spoke Spanish, faculty incorporated Spanish into instruction and assignments, and some learned Spanish to better connect with students. One instructor encouraged students to record their papers aloud in Spanish before translating them into English and then into technical writing, honoring their linguistic journey.

Departments hosted Día de los Muertos celebrations, created culturally affirming clubs, and supported students in navigating family dynamics around travel for internships or conferences. One faculty member even called a student’s mother to ensure the student returned to school after a financial setback—an act of care that helped the student persist and eventually thrive. These practices challenge the norms of STEM that overlook students’ backgrounds and affiliations with their family and local community and affirm that community and academic excellence are not mutually exclusive.

These HSIs—all broadly accessible and non-flagship public institutions—serve large numbers of Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation students in computer science, one of the least diverse and most lucrative STEM fields. Their norms and practices offer concrete examples of how institutional logics can be reoriented toward wider access, responsiveness, and the impact they can have on social mobility.

From Recognition to Transformation

It is long past time to reframe the story of U.S. higher education from exclusion to opportunity. The institutions that truly serve the majority of students—and not just the elite few—are not peripheral; they are central to our collective future. The new Student Access and Earnings Classification and its identification of Opportunity Colleges and Universities offers a powerful lever to recognize and elevate institutions that expand possibilities for students from diverse socioeconomic, regional, and cultural backgrounds. But to do so most effectively, we must understand the institutional logics that guide organizational behavior at these institutions. As organizational scholars Kegan and Lahey (2009) have argued, institutions often resist transformation not because they lack ideas but because they are bound by habits of mind—by attitudes and behaviors that are difficult to unlearn. To embrace an opportunity-centered framework, colleges must adopt new approaches—of service, of stewardship, of shared responsibility—that are exemplified in institutional logics such as those identified in this research: inclusivity, talent development, and community responsiveness.

The new Student Access and Earnings Classification is an opportunity to reorient our attention. It invites us to look beyond media publicity, political scrutiny, research dollars, selectivity, and rankings and instead ask: Who is being served? Whose lives are being changed? What kind of society are we building? It means cultivating new logics—of inclusivity, collaboration, and public purpose and, quite frankly, a more socially responsible approach to accountability. And it means aligning behaviors with these logics: investing in student support, linking resources to opportunity, and measuring success by lives changed instead of rankings climbed. This approach is transformative—to lift future generations and raise the overall health of our society.

The new Carnegie Classification can do more than recognize institutions that promote mobility—it can redefine what counts as excellence. By incorporating metrics and narratives that reflect opportunity-centered logics, the classification can:

- Incentivize institutions to adopt inclusive, student-centered practices
- Challenge the dominance of prestige-based rankings
- Elevate the work of institutions that have long served as engines of mobility but have gone unrecognized

This is not just a technical shift. It is a systemic one. It requires us to reimagine what we value, who we listen to, and how we define success. It calls us to honor the lived experiences of students and educators who are navigating and reshaping systems from the inside out. The new Student Access and Earnings Classification is not just a tool—it is a statement. It says: *We see you. We value you. And we believe that higher education can—and must—be a force for collective uplift and tangible transformation.*

References

- Aguilar-Smith, S. (2024). *Serving Many in Many Ways: Hispanic-Serving Institutions as Drivers of Opportunity and Socioeconomic Mobility (Academix)*. *Third Way*. <https://www.thirdway.org/report/serving-many-in-many-ways-hispanic-serving-institutions-as-drivers-of-opportunity-and-socioeconomic-mobility>
- Arum, R., Stevens, M. L., & Bui, Q. (2023, July 3). “Opinion | For Most College Students, Affirmative Action Was Never Enough.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/03/opinion/for-most-college-students-affirmative-action-was-not-enough.html>
- Computing Alliance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (CAHSI). (n.d.). About. <https://cahsi.utep.edu/about/>
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business Press. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2807119/pdf/ijic2009-200997.pdf>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). (2019). *Minority-Serving Institutions: America’s Underutilized Resource for Strengthening the STEM Workforce*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- National Center for Science and Engineering (NCSES). (2021). *Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering* (No. NSF 21-321). <https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf21321/report>
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023). *Characteristics of Postsecondary Students*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics at The Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csb/postsecondary-students>
- Núñez, A.-M., Rivera, J., Valdez, J., & Barbosa Olivo, V. (2021). “Centering Hispanic-Serving Institutions’ strategies to develop talent in computing fields.” *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2020.1842582>
- Núñez, A.-M. (2022). “Creating Cultures of Student Success: Insights From Hispanic-Serving Institution Computer Science Departments.” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 54(5), 44–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2022.2101867>
- Núñez, A.-M. (2023). “Examining organizational behavior of Hispanic-Serving Institution computer science departments: Toward servingness and equity in the field.” *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering*, 29(2), 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.1615/JWomenMinorScienEng.2022038505>
- Núñez, A.-M. (2024). “Toward opportunity-centered institutional logics: Evidence from Hispanic-Serving Institutions and science equity efforts.” *The Journal of Higher Education*, 96(4), 678–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2024.2344531>
- Pardue, L. (2024). “The Small Role of Ivy League Schools in US Higher Education”. Aspen Economic Strategy Group, Aspen Institute. <https://www.economicstrategygroup.org/publication/the-small-role-of-ivy-league-schools-in-us-higher-education/>
- Rivera, J., & Núñez, A.-M. (2022). “Staff at Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Debugging Challenges in Navigating Computer Science.” *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*, 27(1), 38–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10864822221102477>
- Rivera, J., Núñez, A.-M., & Covarrubias, I. (2024). “Navigating Dissonance in Departmental Ecologies: Latinx Identity Development at HSIs.” *Journal of College Student Development*, 65(5), 457–473.

Rutgers Center for Minority-Serving Institutions. (2024). *Generational Jumps? How HSIs Promote Upward Mobility*. https://cmsi.gse.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/HSI_EMR_23_FIN_WEB.pdf

Villa, E. Q., Hug, S., Thiry, H., Knight, D. S., Hall, E. F., & Tirres, A. (2019). *Broadening Participation of Hispanics in Computing: The CAHSI INCLUDES Alliance*. CoNECD - The Collaborative Network for Engineering and Computing Diversity, Washington, DC. <https://doi.org/10.18260/1-2--31745>

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

