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Author

Pillsbury-Fischler, Jamie

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An Exploration of Contextual Leadership and Presence Among
Professional Non-Academic Staff in One Title V Student Center

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in
Education

by

Jamie E. Pillsbury-Fischler

Committee in charge:

Professor Sarah Roberts, Chair

Professor Sharon Conley

Professor Rebeca Mireles-Rios

March 2023

The thesis of Jamie E. Pillsbury-Fischler is approved.

Sharon Conley

Rebeca Mireles-Rios

Sarah Roberts, Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

An Exploration of Contextual Leadership and Presence Among Professional Non-Academic Staff in One Title-V Student Center

By

Jamie E. Pillsbury-Fischler

This study used a qualitative interviewing approach to explore the psychosocial and organizational dimensions of the leadership of two staff leaders at a student center (The Center) at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Interviews were conducted with two leaders over the course of three years, and I analyzed the findings based on the staff leaders' mental models, self-efficacy, immunities to change, and professional practice of presence. Using Keller and Slayton's (2016) leadership framework, I considered how the professional practice of presence promoted a culture of inquiry and fostered organizational change. Findings indicate that leaders were able to produce unique academic programming built on a foundation of psychosocial and cultural validation through the practice of presence. Furthermore, indications reveal the pivotal role that staff leaders played in cultivating a safe and validating space for Latinx students at an HSI. Research directions are proposed, including further exploration of how leaders' efforts are shaped by their contexts, and how the practice of presence produces organizational change.

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An Exploration of Contextual Leadership and Presence Among Professional Non-Academic Staff in One Title V Student Center

The Latinx population is one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States currently, and they are projected to make up more than half of the U.S. population by 2030 (Vela & Gutierrez, 2017). Subsequently, the number of Latinx students enrolled in institutions of higher education has also rapidly increased. As a result, there is a growing number of institutions nationwide that meet the threshold for the federal designation of an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). HSIs are institutions that enroll a minimum of 25% full-time undergraduate Latinx students, of which at least 50% are low-income (Contreras et al. 2008). Latinx undergraduate students often face unique challenges that can negatively affect their degree completion in the areas of student identity, inclusivity on campus, and culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy (Garcia, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Garcia & Zaragoza, 2020). The purpose of the HSI federal designation is to provide institutions with funding opportunities to recognize and address barriers to educational success for Latinx students. A designation of HSI grants eligibility for Title V funding, which are federal grants intended to improve higher education attainment for Latinx students in the United States through institutional and pedagogical development, material support, professional faculty development, or the development of centralized student centers dedicated to some or all of these different supports. While Title V grants already fund HSI programs and initiatives across the country, there is little research available measuring the efficacy of Title V funded student centers in achieving effective organizational change in service to Latinx students (Roberts & Lucas,

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2020). This study is specifically interested in understanding organizational leadership within one such Title V student center.

One aspect of Title V funding efficacy is the ability of staff and staff leaders overseeing and operating HSI initiatives to promote organizational change. Research suggests that institutional reform designed to achieve large-scale organizational improvements in areas such as diversity, social climate, and student achievement are in large part fostered through strong school leadership (Argyris, 2008; Bolman & Deal, 2017; Brazer & Bauer, 2013; Bush, 2011). Early paradigms of school leadership focused on individual hierarchical leaders, such as school principals or presidents, as the keeper and facilitator of a school's vision (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Northouse, 2019). However, education leadership scholars have long acknowledged that the demands of leading higher education institutions are too great for any one person, and leadership efforts to drive vision and change in collegial settings, such as universities, are distributed across a multitude of leaders (Bush, 2011; Stoll, 2009). Diversity goals and institutional values of a large research university designated as an HSI are enacted and distributed by varying campus leaders, including faculty, professional administrators, and student leaders across campus. At the HSI that is the subject of this research, Title V funding was sought out to assist students (with an emphasis on first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minoritized college students) through the institutional development of a Student Center, "The Center," designed to promote community, to provide programmatic assistance, to provide material support, and to serve as a learning space for the target student population. Exploring how the staff leaders operated and developed this Title V funded Student Center is one way to contextually explore how

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Title V funding supported the practice of presence amongst staff leadership in the service of students at HSI universities.

Researchers have long acknowledged school leadership practices as critical to the type of organizational transformative change necessary to improve institutional diversity, social climate, and student retention and achievement goals (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Harris et al., 2007; Kezar & Eckel, 2008; Northouse, 2019). According to Keller and Slayton (2016), current paradigms of leadership have afforded a foundational understanding of what leaders are doing to lead, but such research is missing in broader efforts to explain and understand the interconnecting contextual factors of leadership that drives organizational change. Keller and Slayton have suggested that leadership efforts are influenced by complex interactions of both internal (psychosocial) and external (organizational) contexts. The psychosocial context represents the leader's individual espoused beliefs about leadership, the ways in which these beliefs translate into practice, and the discrepancies that can occur between the two. Examples of psychosocial constructs include immunities to change, mental models, and leader self-efficacy, which are further explained in the conceptual framework portion of this paper (Keller & Slayton, 2016). External constructs represent the relationship amongst an organization's leader(s) and the organization's members and the ways in which that relationship fosters organizational change and improvement. Such constructs explain the ways that institutional members construct a collective sense of efficacy and capacity beliefs, how members contribute to a professional learning community, and ultimately, how transformational change occurs within organizations (Argyris, 2002, 2008; Collinson & Cook, 2007; Keller & Slayton, 2016).

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Inherent to both internal and external constructs is the idea of presence, which is the act of conscientious reflection on the beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors governing individuals' own professional practice "while identifying and mitigating self-imposed barriers to achieving change" (Keller & Slayton, 2016, p. 702; Senge et al., 2004; Senge, 2006; Slayton & Mathis, 2010). Leaders are in the most favorable position for organizational change when they are engaged in the continuous practice of presence. Presence can be practiced both individually, through continuous self-reflection of one's own professional beliefs, assumptions, and barriers to change, and organizationally, through organizational practices that encourage members to reflect on policy, procedures, and goals. Leaders cultivate organizational presence by encouraging members to participate in a culture of inquiry, learning, and collaboration; a culture which urges members to challenge assumptions, dissolve barriers, and enact practical change to help improve policies and procedures (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Senge et al., 2004). Ultimately, leaders and members who engage in presence both in the psychosocial context and the organizational context are best positioned to promote organizational change. Efforts to identify professional presence within the intersecting internal and external leadership contexts of a Title V-funded Center provided a more robust understanding of how leadership produced effective organizational change at an HSI.

Purpose

The purpose of this independent research project was to conduct an exploratory investigation of the contextual psychosocial and organizational leadership practices of the staff leaders of a Title V-funded student center at an HSI. My central research question was:

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How did the professional staff overseeing the operation of a Title V-funded student center at an HSI promote organizational change through the professional practice of presence?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Keller and Slayton's (2016) contextual leadership framework, which builds on a model of psychosocial and organizational constructs. There are four constructs to Keller and Slayton's model, of which presence is one. These constructs and their relationship to presence provide the foundation for this study and are further clarified here.

Keller and Slayton (2016) have suggested that complex interactions between the internal (psychosocial) context of leaders and the external (organizational) context of organizational members influence and shape organizational change. Internal constructs pertain specifically to the personality, beliefs, and ideas driving the behavior of an individual leader. External constructs pertain to broader social influences of the organization that influence the behavior of organizational members (including the leader), such as cultural norms, organizational hierarchy, and organizational goals and routines. Presence is inherent to both internal leader constructs and external organizational constructs. Presence is a practical effort by both leaders and members to recognize and attend to the assumptions and beliefs that are governing their behavior within an organization. Leaders enable other members to engage in the practice of presence through support of positive adult learning conditions (Collinson et al., 2006).

Presence illustrates a practical effort to recognize and attends to the following constructs in one's daily profession:

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1. Mental models: The leader's underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence observable behavior (Barnitz & Conley, 2020; Keller & Slayton, 2016; Martinez-Keller, 2012);
2. Leader self-efficacy: The leader's own belief in their own capacity to perform effectively in a leadership role; (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011);
3. Immunities to change: The leader's unconscious or conscious beliefs that inhibit progress towards desired outcomes or goals (Argyris, 2002; Argyris, 2008; Barnitz & Conley, 2020; Hannah et al., 2008; Helsing et al., 2008; Keller & Slayton, 2016).

An individual engaged in the self-reflective practice of presence would aim to recognize their own mental models, cultivate their own self-efficacy, and mitigate potential immunities to change. These constructs will be more fully contextualized below. Additionally, an organization and/or organizational leader(s) may encourage members to practice presence through a broad culture of inquiry and reflection on cultural norms, professional routines, and practical policies driving day-to-day decisions. Keller and Slayton's model posits that a leader who both practices presence and encourages other organizational members to practice presence is the most likely to achieve successful organizational change.

I now provide practical examples for the constructs of presence: mental models, leader self-efficacy, and immunities to change to situate them within the context of my study. Mental models are ideas that have been formed and influenced by one's lived experience and inherent assumptions, and that translate into observable behavior (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Senge, 2006). For instance, The Center's leader could form a mental model that the

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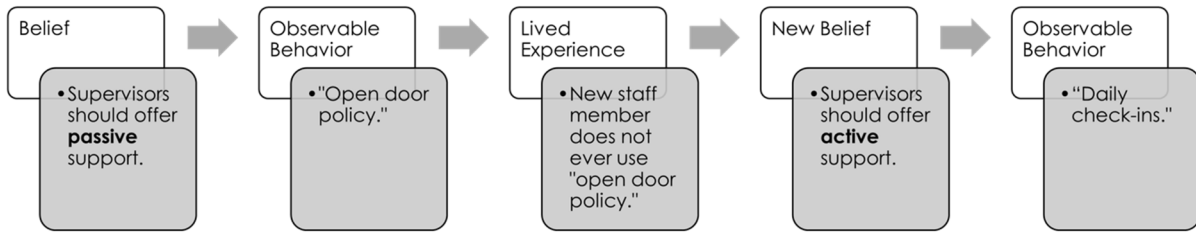
supervisor's role should incorporate continuous passive support of all The Center staff and student users. This mental model may manifest through the The Center leader having an open-door policy for all or most of the day to encourage both students and staff to come visit. In this case, the mental model of "supervisor as passive support" manifests with the observable behavior of the open-door policy. The mental models of organizational leaders often have a cascading influence on the rest of the organization's practices, as staff use modeled behavior to queue their own performance (Keller & Slayton, 2016). In the example above, The Center leader's mental model could influence other center staff practices performed, who may subsequently also develop an open-door policy.

Mental models evolve over time based on lived experience (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Senge, 2006). For example, The Center's leader may hire a new staff member who feels intimidated utilizing the leader's open-door policy. Through this experience, the leader's mental model of "passive support" may evolve in an effort to support their new staff member into "active support," in which The Center's leader begins making a concerted effort to visit staff throughout the day. In this instance, the mental model has now evolved from "supervisor as passive support" to "supervisor as active support," and the leader's behavior has subsequently updated to an observable behavior of daily supportive visits with staff. A conceptualization of this example can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Mental Model

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While all individuals have mental models, not everyone is conscientiously aware of them. Understanding the mental models driving organizational practice can help a leader understand and crystalize their own behavior as a leader. It can also help the leader determine why the organization functions the way that it does, and provide a pathway for developing strategies towards organizational improvement. Through the practice of presence, leaders make an effort to recognize, understand, and articulate their own mental models, which in turn gives leaders the insight necessary to understand and/or alter their own assumptions and behavior. Such an effort could include engaging in debriefs with staff and/or a professional mentor after events or meetings; making a concerted effort to prioritize professional development; making a concerted effort to evaluate why problems or issues are taking place; or providing a platform for and prioritizing time to analyze new ideas or concerns from The Center staff or student users.

Internal and external leadership contexts are also influenced by leader self-efficacy, which is a leader's beliefs regarding their own personal agency as a leader and facilitator of organizational change (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Leader self-efficacy incorporates the leader's level of confidence in their own knowledge, skills, and attributes necessary to motivate others, facilitate goals, and effect change (Hannah et al., 2008; Keller & Slayton, 2016, Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011). Research in the area of self-efficacy suggests that

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leaders require high levels of personal agency to foster similar levels of personal agency in the members they are leading, move members towards group performance, and ultimately cultivate organizational change (Keller & Slayton, 2016). Leader self-efficacy has an influential effect on both mental models and immunities to change. In the above example, the leader had a mental model of "supervisor as passive support," but through a professional experience, their mental model evolved to "supervisor as active support." If the student center leader lacked a sense of leader self-efficacy, they may have failed to react to the new professional experience as a result of low levels of personal-agency and continued their open-door policy even when it was evident that staff were not responsive to that type of support. In Keller and Slayton's (2016) case study of a first-year principal at an independently run charter school, the authors determined that the principal's fear of appearing challenged by the workload had an influential role in the principal ultimately refusing to take a mentorship opportunity with her executive director; her low sense of leader self-efficacy influenced the principal's ability to cognitively separate a need for help from a sign of failure, and ultimately caused her to lose out on a professional development opportunity.

Strong leader self-efficacy in the context of this study would include any instance in which The Center leader recognized a practical or cultural issue within The Center and took the initiative to problem-solve a resolution. For example, The Center leader might notice an apparent drop in student users during finals week. Through a sense of inquiry and self-agency, the leader could pursue the oddity and discover that the peer advisor who usually puts out The Center bifold display sign inviting students into The Center had swapped shifts

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during finals week with another peer advisor and had forgotten to put out the sign. The Center leader with strong leader self-efficacy would take a moment to show the peer advisor where the bifold sign was stored, describing where it would be set up, and explaining the necessity of the sign by drawing attention to the vacant Center space. Through the leader's sense of agency and inquiry, the oddity would be resolved through a quick training opportunity. In contrast, a leader with a low sense of self-efficacy would have dismissed the abnormality, failed to make any inquiries, failed to problem-solve the issue, and The Center would have remained with low student usage throughout the week. Practicing presence to strengthen self-efficacy is critical for leaders, and includes efforts to recognize and develop leadership skills, as well as to build confidence and personal agency. Individuals may seek out and prioritize mentorship and/or professional development opportunities to strengthen their self-efficacy or prioritize time to reflect on and adapt their own professional and organizational goals based on new information and outcomes.

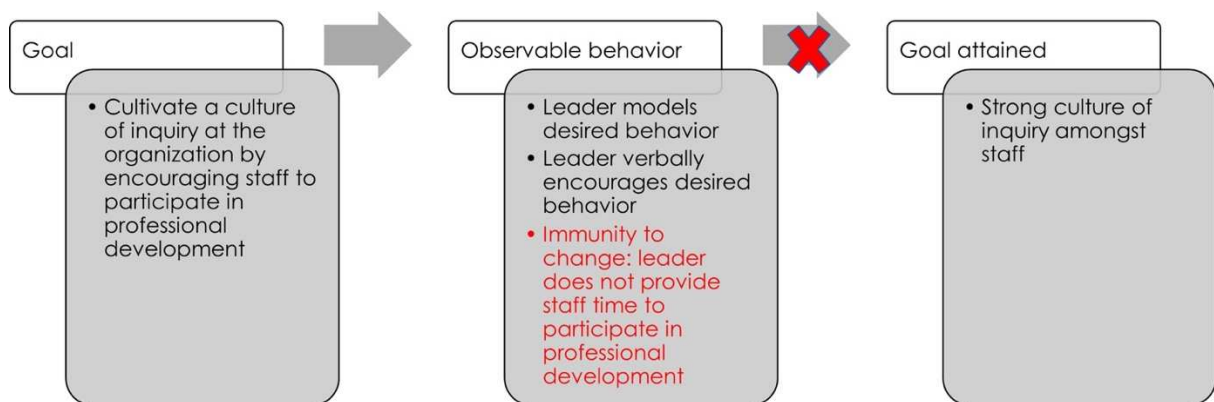
Similar to low levels of leader self-efficacy, immunities to change also have an inhibiting effect on a leader's ability to achieve goals or produce organizational change. Immunities to change are underlying barriers that drive someone to actively – and often unconsciously – prevent their own desired outcomes. For example, The Center leader may have a goal of strengthening a culture of inquiry amongst staff through the encouragement of professional development. The leader exhibits observable behavior towards this goal including regular verbal encouragement towards staff to participate in professional development, regularly brainstorming ideas for potential professional development activities for staff, and modeling desirable behavior through their own participation in professional

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development. However, the leader has a mental model that professional development activity is prioritized below regular duties. This mental model results in the leader's observable behavior of failing to provide adequate time for staff to actually participate in professional development. In this instance, the leader's belief in professional development as an "extra" activity is acting as an immunity to change, and the leader's goal to cultivate a culture of inquiry through professional development has been stifled. Leaders may practice presence to mitigate immunities to change through reflective exercises intended to bring subconscious barriers out in the open for the individual to acknowledge and, ultimately, to alter (Helsing et al., 2008). In practice, this may look like a focus on and a prioritization of professional development; a regular focused reflection activities; an invitation for expert opinions on professional goals, behaviors, and practices; or an invitation of and reflection on Center user feedback. The above example of an immunity to change is visualized in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Example of an Immunity to Change



Literature Review

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I will next provide an account of leadership literature relevant to this research through a report on research in the areas of HSIs, Title V Student Centers, administrative leadership, and presence.

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)

HSIs receive a federal designation status through the current enrollment of Latinx students rather than historical and/or legal origins. The number of institutions that meet the HSI enrollment threshold has grown dramatically in conjunction with the demographic growth of the US Latinx population in recent decades (Calderon Galdeano et al., 2012). Designated HSIs have increased from 137 in 1990 to 415 as of 2016, with an additional 352 emerging HSIs as of 2018 (Vela & Gutierrez, 2017).

Latinx students enrolled in four-year HSIs often have unique priorities and specific needs. For example, Latinx students in four-year HSIs are more likely to be first-generation immigrants (Nunez & Bowers, 2011). Additionally, students enrolling in HSIs more often come from schools with less access to guidance counselors, teachers, or workshops dedicated to preparation for the college transition (Nunez & Bowers, 2011). A majority of Latinx students choose to enroll in institutions of higher education with characteristics that align with Latinx priorities and needs, including low college costs, proximity to where they live, and an approachable campus (de los Santos & Cuamea, 2010). Once enrolled, primary challenges for many Latinx students include campus climate, retention, and cultural challenges, including a sense of culture shock, and conflict between family, academic, and professional responsibilities (Medina & Posadas, 2012; Vela & Gutierrez, 2017). Both research and legislation have established the need for remedying the disparities between

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Latinx and non-Latinx educational opportunity. The federal designation of an HSI provides access to federal grant funding under the Title V program statute.

The Title V federal funding program was enacted to expand educational opportunities for Latinx students, to improve the academic attainment of Hispanic students and to expand and enhance the academic offerings, program quality, and institutional stability of HSIs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). As mentioned in the introduction, Title V funding becomes available to an institution once it reaches the threshold for federal designation of an HSI: an enrollment of at least 25% Hispanic full-time equivalent undergraduate students, of which at least 50% are receiving need-based financial assistance (20 U.S. Code § 1101a, n.d.). Title V grant funding is limited to specific activities outlined in the title for the purpose of achieving its legislative goal, including professional development for faculty, construction and/or renovation of instructional facilities, purchase of educational materials, student services to improve academic success, funds management, and administrative management (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). One such way Title V funding has been utilized by institutions is for the design and implementation of student centers, which combine multiple Title V resources into one established resource center (Roberts & Lucas, 2020).

Student Centers and Title V Centers

In the context of this study, I examined the leadership practices of a Title V-funded student center to understand how contextual leadership functioned to promote organizational change efforts in support of Latinx students at an HSI. At the Title V student center that is the subject of this study, the change efforts of The Center leaders were formally defined in advance of operation through the grant and development process and were categorically tied

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to the support of under-represented minoritized and first-generation students. Literature available on student centers broadly reveals the ways in which such instances of non-instructional student support can improve the educational achievement opportunities for minoritized individuals. Research stresses the significance of academic, social, and financial supports beyond classroom instructional service, as critical to student retention and educational attainment, especially in the first year of a student's enrollment (Tinto, 2012). Webber and Ehrenberg (2010) similarly found that student services expenditures, including expenses for students' emotional and physical well-being and expenses for intellectual, cultural and social development outside of formal instructional programs, had a positive association with increased graduation rates at low-selectivity institutions with a high proportion of students receiving financial aid. In a quantitative study examining the relationship between Title V grants and educational attainment of Latinx students enrolled at four-year HSIs, Perez (2020) found that expenditures in academic support and student services were significant and positive predictors of graduate rates of Latinx students. Many colleges and universities utilize student service expenditures in support of under-represented, minoritized, and first-generation students through the development of student centers under the direction of professional leaders, such as The Center, which is the subject of this study.

While Title V grant programs sometimes include the development of Student Centers, there is very little systemic research available on the function and efficacy of such centers in their capacity to promote educational achievement for Latinx students. I now report on what researchers have discovered on Title V centers relevant to this research proposal. Researchers revealed how a Title V-funded student center focused on academic, social, and material

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supports within a Hispanic Serving Institution operated as a formalized counterspace in which student users found community, safety, and a sense of belonging (Roberts & Lucas, 2020). In this instance, the Title V-funded student center was shown to have shared some qualities and functionalities with a culturally relevant space on campus (such as a culture center); culturally relevant spaces served as safe, familial, and validating spaces for minoritized students, and often contribute to their success through the offering of cocurricular academic, social, and financial supports (Jones et al., 2002; Patton, 2006; Roberts & Lucas, 2020). Another study similarly found that Latinx students enrolled at an HSI gravitated towards physical university spaces that allowed them to engage in socio-academic and nonacademic integration, especially with other Latinx students, including transfer or student retention centers, culture centers, and student union centers (Andrade, 2018).

Many colleges and universities are already proposing Title V funds for the creation or expansion of centralized student centers focused on financial, social, and academic services for Latinx students. For example, a search of funded Title V grant abstracts showed how Victoria College proposed to use Title V funding to expand and improve on their existing Community Connection Center to increase current case-management support services for high-risk students, and proposed further funding to expand their Total Learning Center to increase coaching and tutoring participation rates (US Department of Education, 2021). Riverside City College requested Title V funding to expand campus Engagement Centers to consolidate culturally-relevant programs and services, and foster a sense of belonging for Latinx and low-income students (US Department of Education, 2021). The Inter American

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University of Puerto Rico has proposed to develop an Academic and Financial Program Center with academic and financial advisors and students' peer mentors, in addition to skill-building workshops to foster personal growth, leadership skills, work skills, and financial literacy (US Department of Education, 2021). This study contributes systemic research on the leadership of one such Title V center.

Administrative Leadership and Presence

Student affairs professionals who lead such centers play a significant role in instigating and carrying out effective organizational change efforts to produce student centers that are both institutional support systems and inclusive, culturally sensitive environments for minoritized students (Andrade, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Jones et al., 2002). Many researchers (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2017) now consider the work that individuals do throughout the day, rather than their position (e.g., an individual's professional title or role), as imperative to education leadership capable of effective change efforts. As such, participants in organizational leadership are considered distributed across both assigned, formal leaders (e.g., student center program director) in addition to emergent, non-formal leaders (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Maxwell et al., 2009; Northouse, 2018). Emergent leaders are influential organization members who contribute to organization goals and community building through an effort in staying highly involved, informed, initiative, and communicative; such leaders can include staff (e.g., student center administrative assistant) and even students (e.g., student center peer advisors, student volunteers, student center users; Northouse, 2018).

Researchers have found that administrative leadership efforts to facilitate institutional improvement efforts for minoritized students are driven by the reflective leadership and

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organizational learning practice of presence both by organization members and leaders alike (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Senge et al., 2005; Slayton & Mathis, 2010). Similarly, Collinson et al. (2006) described organizational learning and change as a multilevel inquiry process that takes place at the individual, group, and organizational level. Further research has elaborated on the necessity of the practice of presence as a contributing factor to effective change efforts. Martinez-Keller's (2012) qualitative case study analysis found that an educational administrative leader who exhibited high leader self-efficacy and well-intentioned mental models nonetheless revealed delayed organizational improvement efforts as a result of the mediating effect of their own immunities to change. Barnitz and Conley (2020) highlighted the complexities of educational leadership through a qualitative exploration of the ways in which psychosocial and organizational leadership contexts interacted to foster conditions necessary for organizational change. The authors discussed the necessity in education leaders utilizing a portion of their time to self-reflect, identify, and alter immunities to change and mental models as a means to propagate change efforts. Their study revealed how education leaders' immunities to change dampened member collaboration efforts and lessened member self-reflective behavior, both of which ultimately negatively impacted the leaders' change efforts. Previously, Keller and Slayton (2016) developed this theory of psychosocial and organizational leadership contexts in a qualitative case study of a high school principal by designating the practice of presence as a probable resolution for the mediating effects of immunities to change on the leader's ability to engage in effective organizational learning and capacity building. Slayton and Mathis (2010) also identified that education leadership programs need to instill the necessary skills for education leaders to practice presence in their

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day-to-day, and they further argued that education leaders must be additionally provided the skill and time needed to teach and/or encourage other organization members to practice presence to produce systemic organizational change. In the context of this research, I examined a Title V center using a presence lens to understand how Center leaders utilized professional presence to promote organizational change at a Title V-funded student center in service of Latinx students.

Method

Research Context

The context for this study was a Title V-funded student center within a large public research university situated in the Western United States. When data was collected in 2019-2020, the institution, as a whole, had a total enrollment of approximately 26,000 students, of which approximately 23,000 were undergraduates and 3,000 were graduates. As reported by the institution, the ethnic/racial background was as follows: 1% American Indian/Alaskan, 5% Black/African American, 29% Chicano/Latino, 28% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 35% White.

The university in this study, part of a larger Title V evaluation, was first recognized as an HSI in 2014. The Center prioritized first-generation and minoritized college students and focused on specific courses and majors, where minoritized students had traditionally been underserved at the university. The Center employed two to three staff members, one to three graduate student mentors, and eight undergraduate peer mentors. Staff and graduate mentors developed programming for The Center based on student need through efforts in outreach to other campus resources/services willing to provide or attend workshop or

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mentoring services. It maintained a physical space, which included a lobby, a private conference room, and three staff offices. The Center provided communal resources, including access to public computers, a printer, five tables, and whiteboards. The Center's mission was to “promote the success and retention of first-generation college students, with an emphasis on the first-year transition and underrepresented student experience.” University faculty and staff engaged with and contributed to the mission of The Center through the utilization of the space to hold office hours, the provision of textbooks, and the hosting of informational workshops for students. The Center was open from 8:00am to 5:00pm, Monday through Friday, and encouraged center visitors through general emails, targeted emails, physical letters, live announcements in focal courses, event tabling, social media posts, a promotional event for first-generation (“first gen”) scholars, and the placement of a bifold sign outside pointing people towards The Center.

Participants

For this study, I used a case study methodology, which is best suited for exploring “why” and “how” research questions on contemporary events or phenomenon that have not been separated from their context (Yin, 2018). I used a qualitative single-case design to explore the role of presence in cultivating organizational change at a Title V funded student center operating within an HSI. The case’s boundaries encapsulate two professional non-academic staff leaders working at The Center, with data collection taking place over a three-year period. As a critical case (Yin, 2018), this approach represents a significant contribution to the theoretical leadership framework in its capacity to confirm, challenge, or expand the theory of presence.

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Participants were recruited using purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013), as we deliberately selected participants who were in leadership staff roles of The Center. The sample included two professional non-student staff members working for The Center over the three-year period of this case-study, and we recruited through individual emails, as part of the larger evaluation. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. Staff leaders include Mada, The Center Director, and Yakira, The Center Student Activities Coordinator. The Center was within its first four years of operation during the data gathering period, and, thus, underwent considerable programmatic development and student user growth. Additionally, the grant funding The Center specified goals to promote a mission of diversity and academic achievement and retention for first generation students. As such, both staff leaders were participated in promoting and fostering organizational change at the HSI. Due to some position turnover, there was variation in who we interviewed each year, as is shown in Table 1. Mada, The Center Director, was interviewed in years 1, 2, and 3; Yakira, The Center Student Activities Coordinator, was interviewed in years 1 and 2.

Table 1

Pseudonyms, Role, Work Unit, and Employment Percentage of Study Participants

Participant	Role	Work unit	Employment percentage	Years in study
Mada	Director	Student Center	50%	1, 2, 3
Yakira	Student Activities Coordinator	Student Center	100%	1, 2

Data Collection

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I used data from semi-structured interviews (Glesne, 2011) of the two aforementioned staff leaders working at The Center. The research data is centered around a bounded unit: the staff leaders of a student center (both formal and emergent) and a bounded timeframe: a three-year data collection period (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). During the data gathering period, the research team conducted one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews once a year with each staff leader from The Center (Yin, 2016). The interviews were approximately one-hour in length, took place in the Spring of each year, were recorded and then later transcribed verbatim via a paid service, and then the research team cleaned the transcriptions. The interview questions included questions focused on the staff members' role in The Center, the organizational structure of The Center, the student population using The Center, and the staff members' evaluation of The Center. There were no original interview questions related to presence, because the interviews occurred before the development of my theoretical framework, as discussed further within the limitations section.

The research team developed the in-depth semi-structured interview protocol through several iterations of revisions based on discussions during research meetings; the semi-structured approach was used in order to allow the researchers the ability to build and maintain rapport through conversation, to clarify unclear statements, and to probe with follow-up questions for depth and richness of data (Murphy, 1980; Spradley, 1979; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). An ethnographic interview methodology was appropriate in this instance, as we wished to understand the participant's practices, experiences, and beliefs within the context of the shared community perspectives of The Center (Brenner, 2006). The interviews took place within the staff's workspace as a "grass-hut" interview, which provided

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a feel for the primary work environment and surrounding space and provided a familiar space to interview the participant (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). Initial grand-tour descriptive questions included ethnographic topics on actors, time management, and job description; intermediate grand-tour structural and descriptive questions included topics of actors, as well as space/environment; finally, ending with a grand-tour contrast and descriptive questions provided topics on opinions of The Center, the success rate of the participants, and the student experience (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Murphy, 1980; Spradley, 1979; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987). An example of both a structural and a contrast question in the protocol was; “What are the strengths of The Center, and what areas of improvement would you like to see?” Such questions were developed to encourage the participant to move into complex self-analytical ideas and touched on ethnographic interview topics of space, actors, descriptions, and expressions of opinion. The interview protocol is found in Appendix A.

The participants were provided information necessary during recruitment and at the beginning of interviews in order to provide fully informed consent; consent was requested verbally (and recorded) immediately prior to conducted interviews, as was outlined in the IRB protocol.

Data Analysis

I pair-coded the staff interview transcripts with another graduate student using a priori coding (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013), drawing on themes drawn from Keller and Slayton’s (2016) contextual leadership framework to analyze the collected data. Using a turn-of-talk as our unit of analysis, we used the following a priori codes: “immunity to change,” “mental model,” “self-efficacy,” and “presence” (Keller & Slayton, 2016). The graduate student and I

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developed a code book, found in Table 2, that listed the codes, code descriptions, and descriptions of conditions in which the code became operative, in addition to specific examples of each code (Emerson et al., 2011). Rules for coding included the following: data could not be assigned multiple codes; data was assigned the code of highest relevance; data was assigned a code of “no code” when there was no relevancy.

The research team trained on an initial 10% data set, reconciled the differences, and then proceeded to code increments of 20% of the overall data set until we could verify that agreements between researchers exceeded chance levels (McHugh, 2012). After each reconciliation, I updated the codebook to provide clarification on code definitions and examples of codes. We achieved a Cohen’s Kappa of 80% reliability after two rounds of coding 20% segments, by which point 50% of the overall data had been coded (including the initial 10% training sample). Once reliability had been met, I proceeded to code the remaining 50% of the data alone. After all of the data had been coded, I then documented emergent thematic patterns and summaries related to both presence and contextual leadership, including mental models, immunities to change, and leadership self-efficacy. For example, the “mental model” thematic patterns included “leader as staff supporter,” “leader as collaborator,” or “leader as delegator.” Likewise, thematic patterns related to “presence” included “community-building,” and “programmatic development.” I attempted to capture the broader context for each individual code by summarizing emergent patterns based on when they occurred, why they occurred, and how often they occurred.

I wrote thematic summaries for each participant, documenting emergent views related to contextual leadership. I then applied the psychosocial and organizational contexts

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framework to formulate a conceptual understanding of the staff leaders' mental models, self-efficacy, immunities to change, and presence.

Table 2

Codes Used for Analysis of Interview Data

Code	Definition	Operative Trigger
Mental Model	The underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence an individual's behavior.	Participant makes reference to their own professional practice, identity, role, beliefs, or values that triggers, influences, drives, or restrains behavior.
Immunity to Change	The unconscious beliefs that inhibit progress towards an individual's desired outcomes or goals.	Participant refers to contradictory beliefs; subject refers to beliefs that are contradictory to observations of other organizational members; subject makes note of behavior that does not reflect their own stated beliefs, values, ideas, goals; subject refers to professional goals which have been challenging to obtain.
Self-Efficacy	An individual's belief in their own capacity to perform effectively.	Participant refers to their own abilities, traits, authority, capacity for leadership, capacity for organizational improvement, or makes an explicit or implicit value judgement on their relationship with the organization or their relationship with other organizational members.
Presence	The reflective exercise of identifying and challenging the governing assumptions that make up professional practice while identifying and mitigating self-imposed barriers to achieving change.	Participant makes implicit or explicit statement of self-reflection; practices a culture of inquiry; fosters inquiry in others; makes reference to being open to other organization members criticism, ideas, or concerns; actively seeks out other member's ideas; self-

reflects; makes reference to fostering learning opportunities or participating in learning opportunities.

Findings

I will now present the findings using the cases of two staff leaders at The Center. For each staff leader, I will discuss their individual mental models, self-efficacy, immunities to change, and presence with particular emphasis on beliefs and practices around leadership. I highlight the conditions staff leaders found were important for organizational improvement and challenges they faced, with a focus on instances of the professional practice of presence. Using Keller and Slayton's (2016) leadership constructs, I allowed this framework to inform the definitions and differences between the constructs of mental models, leadership self-efficacy, immunities to change, and presence. For example, if the leader expressed a regular commitment to building professional collaborative networks, I considered that to be a mental model of leader as collaborator and supporter. As Barnitz and Conley (2022) noted in a K-12 leadership study, "this typology was helpful in assessing what the leaders were attempting to accomplish as well as potential barriers to leadership development" (p. 13). My references to school leadership in these findings are both from the staff leaders' accounts, but also cross-referenced with the other staff informants at The Center. Table 3 briefly provides a summary of findings in the four areas of mental models, self-efficacy, immunities to change, and presence.

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Table 3

Mental Models, Self-Efficacy, Immunities to Change, and Presence

	Mada	Yakira
Mental Models	The leader primarily endorsed a mental model of inclusivity and diversity, with a particular emphasis on first-generation students, and she endorsed a mental model of leader as collaborator and supporter.	The leader primarily endorsed a mental model of holistic support for all students and endorsed a mental model of leader as serving students.
Self-Efficacy	The leader expressed high levels of confidence leading The Center in providing an overall strategic vision through her prior experience in research, in a faculty role, and in directorship of other student Centers. Self-efficacy was lower in terms of predicting student turnout for programs.	The leader expressed high levels of self-efficacy in the areas of student service, student success initiatives, and academic and research experience. She expressed lower levels of self-efficacy in comfortability operating within The Center, because she was fairly new to her position.
Immunities to Change	The leader initially expressed a commitment to a center that was muted around cultural responsiveness. However, she later explained that she had actually felt that The Center should be culturally responsive towards minoritized students all along, but political tension and pushback from campus leadership contributed to an overall sense of inaction and muteness in this area. Fear over pushback may have contributed to difficulties in collaborating a shared governance approach with The Center.	The leader indicated a strong commitment to uncovering and serving student needs; that student needs are informed in part by the students themselves; and that serving in this capacity is directly related to The Center mission statement. However, in some instances, she dropped this commitment to student needs, indicating that the particular need did not align enough with The Center mission statement. Contradictory mental models can indicate underlying fears, which may prove a barrier to organizational change over time.
Presence	The leader exhibited a practice of presence in the areas of: (1) developing programming for The Center, (2) creating community, relationship, and partnership building, (3) attracting targeted students to The Center, and (4) fostering a culture of belonging and welcome in The Center.	The leader exhibited a practice of presence in the areas of: (1) handling the day-to-day optimizations for The Center as a welcoming and inclusive space, and (2) fostering a culture of learning and communication amongst Center staff.

Mada

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Mada's work as The Center's Director began when she was hired in the Spring of 2017. Prior to her role as Director of The Center, Mada worked as the founding director of a separate student center on the same campus focused on transfer student support beginning in June of 2016. Beginning in 2017, she served in a split capacity with 50% of her time dedicated to The Center and 50% of her time dedicated to the continuing support of the first center focused on transfer students. Prior to her Directorship role, Mada served in a faculty position after receiving her PhD in Education.

Much of Mada's focus during her initial efforts as Director of The Center were targeted towards developing programming, increasing student usage, and building cross-campus professional partnerships. Additionally, Mada characterized her role as "thinking and developing and sustaining the programs that [The Center staff] have; primarily in terms of academic support" and "continuing to assess and think of new or different ways of doing what we're doing academically."

Because The Center was funded by a Title-V grant, initial programming goals, services, and target student demographics were developed in advance of The Center's official opening, in part through the HSI grant-writing process. However, as The Center opened and began implementing programming and serving student users, Mada prioritized a flexible and responsive approach to The Center's operation that adjusted to changing student needs, student feedback, budgetary restrictions, and University policy restrictions. Her efforts were meant to "honor the several ideas and programs that had already been developed," while still "modifying [the programming] so that it was sustainable for us to continue on." Mada described her leadership efforts as "sustaining what we have in place in terms of office hours

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and the course mentoring and covering all of those areas. But also... continuing to assess and think of new or different ways of doing what we're doing academically.”

Mada worked to convey the idea that professional collaboration and professional partnerships were key to achieving the goals of The Center and that all staff (including the undergraduate peer advisors) had a vital role to play in not only the operation of The Center, but the development and growth of The Center. Mada shared: “I think that’s one of the biggest things that’s important for me is that no one does anything in isolation because it’s not possible. Right – it takes a village, it takes a community, it takes an entire staff.” She emphasized that the staff “aren’t just in this role to be in this role or to be... a body in The Center checking people in” but instead staff are afforded the opportunity to “contribute to what we make of this [Center].”

Mada’s Mental Models

In discussing her leadership practice, Mada primarily endorsed a mental model of inclusiveness and diversity, with a particular emphasis on first-generation students. Secondarily, she espoused a mental model of director as collaborator and supporter, one who focused on building professional connections.

Mental Model: Inclusivity and Diversity

Mada emphasized that The Center’s focus on serving first-generation students was an important aspect in cultivating inclusivity for the “first year experience” and the “underrepresented student experience.” She described The Center’s users as “all kinds of students,” but she noted that there was a large percentage of users who were first-generation, in addition to historically underrepresented students of color. Mada discussed how first-

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generation students are made up of a broadly diverse range of students, including both historically represented and underrepresented students, in addition to students across the economic spectrum. She explained that often, first-generation students “don’t have an understanding of the higher education system... as a culture,” and can benefit from support in learning the “unknowns and unspoken rules” of a university. There is a challenge to supporting and meeting the needs of such a diverse student body; Mada navigated inclusivity for such a diverse group of students through a holistic approach to academic support, emphasizing a validating and engaging space, and leaning on community-building for all students.

One way in which Mada expressed the mental model of inclusivity and diversity was through her commitment to validating students’ identities as a foundational building-block to academic programming. Mada described the ability for students to “be who they are and bring their identities... into the university” as a vehicle for academic success. Other centers on campus focused on cultural/social programming and validation and/or academic services, but the unique aspect of The Center, according to Mada, was the usage of psychosocial and cultural validation support as a foundational structure for the development of academic programming. Mada explained that the staff’s decision to put inclusivity and belonging as a top priority creates a somewhat novel space for student users in an academic space: “a place where people look like them or think like them or have had the same background.” While the purpose of The Center was “first and foremost academic,” Mada described The Center’s overall success in “seeing folks as who they are, validating their belonging in the university, providing peers and leadership who have experienced similar things, who come from similar

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backgrounds, who were also first-generation college students, who are also people of color.” Part of the actions staff took to contribute to this validation, according to Mada, included the welcoming atmosphere, learning of names, personal connections, and a willingness to express personal authenticity and share personal experiences.

The mental model of inclusivity and diversity was a driving factor in many of Mada’s decisions regarding Center program development and support services throughout the three-year research period; Mada expressed that all core programming development, at least in part, should be considerate of (but not specific to) research-driven support of historically underrepresented and first-generation demographics. Such supports included community-building, mentoring opportunities, student engagement, cultural/social validation, and campus resource connections. She explained that she developed programming and services by first considering “what... we see in the research literature in terms of what’s necessary for student success for historically underserved student populations and then how do we get creative about making sure that our programs are touching on those points?” For example, The Center hangs a series of posters on the walls called ‘first-gen spotlight!’ which include a picture, name, position, hometown, and a quote offering advice from faculty and/or staff on campus that identify as first-generation. Mada described the importance of minoritized students seeing role models “that look like them,” and how her intentional decision to develop and hang the posters was partially in response to Solórzano’s et al.’s (2000) research on counterspace, a theory centered around the idea of safe spaces for minoritized students seeking relief from racial microaggressions. In another example, The Center hosted faculty office hours for targeted courses in the open study space to provide students an opportunity

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to participate in a low-stakes environment; Mada described this as an intentional decision based on research that discussed the importance of demystifying faculty for some groups of minoritized students. She explained that hosting faculty office hours in The Center “gives our students more confidence to come in and actually see the professor if it’s an open space where they can pretend like they’re studying and then get the nerve to come up and join the group.” Mada stated that this practice was informed by Rendon’s (1994) research on cultural validation, a theory which posits that the recognition, respect, and appreciation for students’ personal and cultural history plays a major role in the success and retention of students in college (Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Rendon, 1994). Mada also listed Cooper’s et al.’s (2002) research on bridging multiple worlds model as a major influence on the faculty office hours programming. This model focuses on the ways in which youth build identities that coordinate their cultural and family traditions with those of their community (including their school), and the methods and strategies they use to navigate in between (Cooper et al., 2002).

Another way in which Mada expressed her mental model of inclusivity and diversity throughout her professional practice was with a consistent commitment to facilitating a culture of welcome and belonging within The Center. Part of this commitment manifested with one-on-one student connections. In taking the Director role, Mada discussed how it was important for her to maintain direct mentoring interactions with students even as her official role focused primarily on programmatic development and staff supervision. Mada explained that for “students who have just started coming in here, my office is always open and they can always come in at any time. I’ll learn their names if they come in here enough. We know who they are and we say hello and we check in.” Mada emphasized the importance of “that

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building community piece” and how that fosters an environment that lets student users know that “you belong here and we know who you are and we miss you when you don’t come in.” She described the role that personal validation plays in academic success, and how staff authenticity played a key part in facilitating this sense of belonging. She explained:

I think it helps [students] be authentic to who they are... when we, as staff, haven’t put up any airs in terms of being professional. It’s about connecting on this individual level, so I’ll share my personal stories about myself and my family, and I think that invites students to be open about who they are when we are willing to be open about who we are.

This quote exemplified Mada’s value of authenticity and personal connections in her work with students at The Center; she attributed part of a student’s willingness to utilize advising, programming, and resources from The Center to the staff’s willingness to act authentically and formulate personal connections.

Mental Model: Leader as Collaborator/Supporter

The second mental model endorsed by Mada was Director as collaborator and supporter in her discussion of: (1) her efforts to sustain a culture of inquiry through professional development opportunities and regular team meetings for staff; (2) her dedication to sustaining and implementing Center programmatic development opportunities for staff; and (3) her persistent goal in fostering cross-campus partnerships.

Mada emphasized her goal with regards to staff training was to ensure that all peer staff understand the necessity of inclusivity and belonging from the very beginning: in which all students “feel like they belong in the university regardless of who they are and where they

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come from.” She established an intensive one-week summer training for undergraduate peer staff in which she presents on The Center’s target student populations, both in terms of academic research and anecdotal professional experiences. After the initial one-week training session, Mada explained that training opportunities remained consistent (if not regular) throughout the academic year, and included workshops on campus resources (including mental health services, tutoring services, financial aid, and crisis relief plans), material campus resources, HSI funding and programming, and peer advising. In addition to training, Mada discussed the importance of weekly staff meetings as “a reminder that we’re trying to create a space that serves students.” Additionally, staff meetings were an important part of open communication amongst staff. Such efforts were all towards fostering a sense of collaboration and shared ownership of The Center amongst staff.

Another instance in which Mada expressed the mental model of Director as collaborator and supporter was her goal to ensure that The Center staff developed the agency to explore their own ideas in developing The Center space and programming. This goal was particularly prevalent for the undergraduate peer advisors. Mada talked about how important it was to her for the peer staff to “own up and realize and understand that they come with a lot of experience themselves.” She explained that one of her goals for the peers advisors was:

really about... asking them to draw on their strengths to say this is about giving back to your peers... you’re not just in this role to be in this role or to be in this center, or to be a body in The Center and checking people in, it’s that you get to contribute to what we make of this.

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To this end, Mada developed a proposal training workshop for the undergraduate peer staff in which she established a clear protocol for proposing programming, which included a proposed name, date, timeline, professional campus partnership, budget, purpose, and justification. Peers were encouraged and expected to submit proposals to their supervisor throughout the year, and they were welcomed to discuss potential ideas at every weekly meeting. Examples of programming resulting from peer advisor proposals included two workshops designed specifically for brand new students: a presentation introducing the quarter system, and a presentation on the basics of being a new college student, which included information as far-ranged as defining a ‘discussion section’ to common campus acronyms to tips on the best bus routes. During the transition to online service in 2020 because of the Covid-19 epidemic, this trend of student-proposed programming was furthered with even more creative video presentations on ‘Zoom 101,’ strategies for remote learning, using Google calendar, and a cooking stream in partnership with the campus nutrition unit.

Mada described the professional non-student staff at The Center as being responsible for well-established core programming, such as the faculty mentor connection program or workshops on campus resources. The peer mentors, however, were responsible for ‘one-off’ programs meant to respond to current, relevant, and immediate student needs, such as yoga workshops during finals week, workshops on personal time-management during midterms, information on mental health resources available for students during ‘dead week’ (the week before finals week), etc. Mada explained:

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we allow our [undergraduate peer mentors], and really expect our [undergraduate peer mentors], to take ownership of their strengths and their experiences to develop workshops that they think would be relevant and helpful for students who are probably in the same shoes that they were in.

Lastly, Mada expressed the mental model of Director as collaborator and supporter in her dedication to professional cross-campus connections with other centers and departments. Part of the ways in which Mada ensured that the majority of staff resources focused on academic programming while maintaining the need for holistic support of first-generation students was through partnerships. She explained:

At the start of an idea, one of the first things that I think about and that we think about is who can we potentially collaborate with. So, if there are certain things that should be offered by someone else on campus. Because it's about expanding knowledge and reach of campus services. That's where we turn to our partners.

Mada acknowledged the importance of the “non-academic pieces,” such as the “community-building pieces [and] the peer-to-peer interaction opportunities” as a necessary aspect of support for first-generation students, but not something that The Center had the labor resources, funding, time, or expertise to accomplish in isolation. She emphasized that partnerships afforded the opportunity for The Center to “introduce [Center users] to other campus resources to go to for help with that non-academic piece” while saving The Center staff from “recreating anything that's already being done.” Mada trained all staff on the importance of partnerships: “If there are other people on this campus that this [program or service] should be a partnership with then let's bring them in so we're not reinventing the

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wheel.” Lastly, Mada noted the importance in building campus partnerships as a means to institutionalize The Center within the campus community. Part of the success of The Center was tied to “the visibility of The Center” and how much buy-in they get from faculty and staff across campus willing to work with and promote their services to ensure a wider reach to students. When discussing goals for The Center, Mada explained:

How are we putting ourselves out there in a way to the campus community and how are we developing our reputation within the campus community with the different academic departments, with the different units, with the administration to say we are doing really positive work?

Mada did not just see the importance of campus-partnerships as self-serving; she believed in the benefit of large-scale conversations about student support within the community. She shared: “I think aside from the programming and the cross-promotion, it’s recognizing that we see each other as resources so that we can count on each other. It’s having these conversations about student support on a larger scale as well.”

Mada’s Self-Efficacy

Higher Levels of Self-Efficacy

Mada displayed a high level of leadership self-efficacy during her Directorship with The Center as a result of previous professional experience and her academic research background. Because of her prior role as a faculty member, Mada felt confident in her ability to navigate faculty partnerships at the university. Her prior faculty positions gave her “a lot of insight into how to work with faculty.” Furthermore, as a PhD student, Mada acted in the role of Teaching Assistant (TA), Graduate Student Researcher (GSR), and graduate student

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program evaluator. She described her “main training” related to The Center and the Director position as stemming from her research areas for her master’s and her Ph.D. in education, which focused on “supporting the persistence and retention of underrepresented students in higher education.” She explained that this research experience provided the background necessary to her understanding of “the purpose of The Center, and the direction that we wanted it to go, and the programs that would support student success.” Mada’s extensive background in academic and student-oriented service positions in addition to her academic research focus provided a broad pool of experience which contributed to an overall sense of professional competency.

In addition, directly prior to taking up the position of Director at The Center, Mada served as the founding director of a separate center located on the same campus dedicated to transfer student services. This professional experience provided a sense of trajectory for Mada in student services programming and center development. Mada described that when she “stepped into the [Center Director] position, there was a skeleton of a center that existed because of the research that had already been done” during the founding development of the prior center dedicated to transfer students. As such, she felt professionally prepared in designing the programming, determining the hiring structure, hiring the graduate student and undergraduate student peer mentors, and determining what the professional staff should look like. Her comments about providing the “strategic vision” and “strategic direction” for The Center reflected her high sense of efficacy for the role.

Lower Levels of Self-Efficacy

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One area in which Mada felt less efficacious was her ability to estimate timing for certain programming in a way that would capture the most persistent student engagement. She said it is “continually a challenge to think about timing. You know – when is the best time? When should it be offered.” She explained that Fall Quarter produces a persistent enthusiasm and high levels of engagement with students, but Winter and Spring Quarters proved challenging in terms of retention and continued engagement. The Center’s staff developed a general best-practice for program timing: “We tend to go for afternoons. Mornings are not great because no one wants to wake up... core programs happen after 5:00PM because we expect that more students are done with classes for the day.” However, Mada admitted that engagement can be surprisingly unpredictable. She described one faculty speaker event that was so crowded that people were standing in the back, and then a similar faculty speaker event within the same quarter in which hardly anyone showed up. She could only guess that the drop-off in student attendance had something to do with poorer weather conditions or the start-time variations. In another instance, she discussed attempts to implement ‘learning communities,’ for a targeted physics course. She described the timing as perfect to introduce this program, because the faculty had agreed to host office hours in The Center and had agreed to promote the program with a required online tool for the course. However, after initiating the program, Mada found engagement to be extremely low. She explained, “Here we thought this would be a great time to try [learning communities] again because of all these other factors, but it just didn’t work. So, we just tabled it again.”

Part of this uncertainty stemmed from a self-described lack of experience, because The Center was within its first few years of operation during the three-year research period;

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she explained that the staff have tried to ask themselves what student supports might be most relevant in Spring and Winter, but said “whether or not we have successfully done that I’m not entirely sure because I feel like we really only have had the last year to get a sense for how things are going.” This lowered level of efficacy regarding timing and engagement was exacerbated with the move to a virtual setting during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mada’s Immunities to Change

Interview comments may have suggested a possible immunity to change for Mada. In the second year of her directorship with The Center, Mada discussed The Center’s targeted student demographic in terms of the HSI grant as a “complicated political issue on campus.” She explained:

People have very different ideas of who the target students are especially because the grant itself says we’re supposed to serve all students, right?... I think some students and some other staff and faculty across campus think the intention of the grant is supposed to only specifically serve Latinx student populations. Whereas the... grant says it really is supposed to be the tide that lifts all boats.

She described her attempt to ensure that no one feels turned away or left out, and how intentional they were in writing The Center’s missions statement to ensure that the space was for “first generation college students and not all students of color.” The caveat of serving the first-year experience in addition to the underrepresented student experience was meant to be an assurance of broad inclusivity for The Center housed under the academic affairs unit.

Yet, in the last year of this study, Mada’s description of The Center’s target demographic shifted when The Center changed funding sources, moved under a different

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college unit, and came under the purview of different campus leadership. After these changes took place, Mada spoke much more openly about certain constraints she had felt with regards to her and The Center's ability to serve students. She expressed that she was looking forward to taking the opportunity to shift The Center into a space that is more open about serving minoritized students, overtly names certain minoritized populations in programming, and acts with cultural responsiveness.

I think we can, especially with this time period with the institution and our nation thinking about hopefully moving towards becoming a lot more anti-racist, thinking about how we contribute to systems of white supremacy. I'm looking forward to the fact that we can shift in more, so, addressing that we are a space that serves racially minoritized students and [should] be more open about that because... in some ways we've been a little bit mute and I'm looking forward to the fact that we can push back on that.

Looking back, Mada shared from the very beginning, how her work and The Center's purpose had served minoritized students, yet, "it was challenging to [be]... often told that you can't really just identify it as a space for students of color and minoritized students... we're still in an academic world." Such instances in which education leaders do not appear to be operating with a shared-governance approach may indicate a possible immunity to change.

Mada's Practice of Presence

Mada illustrated instances of presence within her professional practice throughout the three-year period of this study. The instances in which she practiced presence during the

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first-year interview were centered around: (1) developing programming for The Center, (2) community, relationship, and partnership building, and (3) attracting targeted students to The Center. These areas of presence persisted through years two and three. Additionally, in years two and three, Mada exhibited instances of presence in the area of fostering a culture of belonging and welcoming in The Center. In these cases, Mada demonstrated a focused reflection on an issue or goal within her professional practice, often including opportunities for staff to collaborate in debrief and revision efforts, which later translated into concrete behavior in an effort to produce organizational change.

Presence: Program Development

Mada demonstrated presence in the area of program development for The Center. In one instance, she described a period in which The Center was experiencing some turnover, limiting The Center's capacity for student support due to a labor shortage. In response to this issue, Mada expressed her goal to honor the programming already in place while also modifying it to ensure sustainability for The Center staff under the strained circumstances. She described how she reflected on The Center's mission as an academic space to help guide her thinking, and she also described some of the steps she took to offload Center labor needs. She refocused on cross-campus partnerships to assist with programming, in addition to shifting more of a reliance on The Center's peer mentors to assist with program development. These actions were driven in part by Mada's mental model of director as collaborator and supporter. "It's been quite a year... we kept what could be sustainable for us to do and possible for us to do throughout this academic year... As a professional staff, what I see as my main responsibility is to think of the academic stuff and then... open [other

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programming] up to the staff to provide ideas of different areas where we could add other kinds of programming.” Here, we can see how Mada responded to a labor shortage issue by shifting the focus of The Center temporarily to rely more heavily on collaborative efforts across campus and across The Center staff to maintain academic support for first-generation students.

Presence: Community, Relationship, and Partnership Building

Mada practiced presence in the area of building up professional working relationships, which included efforts in community-building for student users, cross-campus partnerships for The Center, and a culture of collaboration amongst The Center’s staff. In one such example, Mada described an instance in which she recognized a need to support first-generation students with campus-engagement opportunities, based in part on related research literature. Mada, collaborating with Center staff, sought partnerships with campus centers dedicated to career services, undergraduate research services, and faculty to specifically meet the needs of student campus engagement opportunities. In some instances, such partnerships entailed staff representatives of The Centers hosting weekly office hours in The Center to educate or advise on specific topics; in other instances, such campus partnerships split cost, labor, promotion, and/or space resources to develop and host workshops, events, faculty speakers, or expert panels.

Presence: Attracting Students

Mada also exhibited instances of presence in the area of attracting students to The Center, which were particularly pronounced over the three-year period of this study. In the first year of this study, Mada described the efforts she took to promote The Center. Her initial

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efforts were informed in part by the advice of the Principal Investigator of the HSI grant funding The Center and a previous Center Coordinator; such efforts included a personalized welcome letter mailed directly to the home and email address of approximately 1,400 students earmarked as potential targets of The Center's support services. Additionally, Mada organized a welcome event in the first week of Fall Quarter for first-generation students with invited first-generation identifying faculty and staff speakers, raffle prizes, and refreshments. Mada also described promotional efforts on social media, delivery of Center newsletters to targeted faculty and departments, and visiting faculty during department meetings to pitch The Center. In the second year of the study, Mada described renewed efforts to attract students to The Center, including tabling at campus events (especially during the first week of Fall quarter), and targeted class announcements in the first few weeks of the quarter by Center peer advisors. In addition, The Center put on the welcome event in week one again and noted that participation increased from about 200 students in year one to 300 students in year two. The effort on the part of Center staff to think of new and better ways to increase student usage of The Center illustrates a reflective culture focused on promoting organizational change.

In year three of this study, The Center transitioned from in-person to remote services resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Mada described the dramatic routine changes, programmatic changes, and strategy changes that took place during this time. The Center dropped faculty programming entirely in the Spring in recognition of the "major shifts right now" causing high stress. In addition, Center staff extended an offer to peer mentors to work remotely over the Winter break (which was not a usual occurrence) to help transition

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programming to a virtual setting. Staff collaborated to brainstorm and develop videos and workshops to post online which related to the needs of first-generation students in a remote learning environment. Topics included time-management, remote learning strategies, and online calendaring tools. In addition, Mada developed a website in partnership with other campus units (that had also gone remote) as a repository of information and support specific to remote learning. Peer advisors transitioned mentoring hours onto Zoom, and Mada began offering mentoring hours over Zoom as well, which was a new dedicated service for her.

Presence: Culture of Belonging and Welcoming

The rapid and dramatic changes in the operation of The Center during the Covid-19 pandemic illustrated a persistent practice of presence, in which Mada encouraged collaborative efforts amongst Center staff to reflect on and develop practices to support the new and changing needs of The Center's student users to create a culture of belonging and welcoming. For the posted videos, Mada noted that engagement was high – higher than live programming – with hundreds of views per video (although she noted that the videos were cross-promoted across several campus units). Mada did acknowledge a massive drop in the synchronous student engagement with office hours and Zoom workshops during the Spring quarter. However, she posited that: (1) the trend in low student engagement was universal across campus and not specific to The Center, and (2) the services provided by The Center were extremely important because, for those students that did engage, “they definitely needed it.” This mentality offered a slight shift in Mada's outlook on student support services; whereas she had often exhibited a balanced approach between resource management and student services for The Center in years one and two of this study, after the start of the

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pandemic, Mada appeared more likely to value student support services even in instances when resources were disproportionately distributed to few students. In the example of her office hours, Mada noted that just because very few students had a need for a specific support did not mean that support was less necessary or valuable than supports aimed at needs shared across many students. This practice of presence appeared to be consistent with Mada's mental model of inclusivity and diversity and showcased Mada's emphasis on cultivating The Center as a validating, welcoming, and engaging space for students.

Yakira

Yakira became the Student Activities Coordinator for The Center in January 2018. For the seven years prior to her start with The Center, Yakira taught and researched as a faculty member at a college of education in South Africa. Prior to that, she worked in student affairs in a university setting. She described her role at The Center as overseeing the "day-to-day activities of The Center and making sure that our goals are met on a daily basis." The position of Student Activities Coordinator entailed, "working closely with the students and supervising ten peer mentors and four graduate student mentors." Yakira explained that success in her role required a background in education research and literature, in addition to regular professional development.

Yakira described The Center as a space "focused on supporting first-generation students, and increasing retention of first-generation students, and the promotion of first-year experiences, whether that be freshman coming out of high school, or whether that be transfer

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students who are experiencing their first year [on campus].” She described it as an “inclusive center” staffed with a warm and welcoming people focused on student support. Further, she shared, “Our job, and [what should be] the job of really everyone else on campus, is to help students navigate the university and be successful academically, socially, interpersonally.” Yakira credited much of the success of The Center in facilitating a sense of welcome and belonging for student users to the attitude of the staff (both the professional non-academic staff and the undergraduate peer advisors).

Yakira’s Mental Models

Yakira primarily endorsed a mental model of holistic support for all students and secondarily endorsed a mental model of leader as serving students.

Mental Model: Holistic Support for All Students

Regarding the first mental model, Yakira referred to the necessity of a holistic approach to student support services when discussing programming, faculty mentorships, peer mentorship, one-on-one mentorship interactions, and cultivating a culture of welcome and belonging. For Yakira, academic and nonacademic supports for students were inextricably interlinked. When asked to discuss the ways in which The Center supported students academically versus nonacademically, Yakira explained “It’s a messy thing to try to disentangle the two, although it’s clear that in some areas we’re doing very much *more* academic support, and in other areas it’s very much *more* holistic support.” Here, it was evident that Yakira did not believe in segmenting student support into discrete categories of academic compared to nonacademic categories, but instead she found the two to be both equally necessary and interrelated.

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Yakira's mental model of holistic support for students encompassed two aspects: Yakira believed that: (1) students may be impeded in academic success and/or retention by psychosocial and/or physical hardships, and (2) students otherwise doing well academically may drop out regardless due to psychosocial and/or physical hardships. With regards to the first aspect, Yakira explained that "academic success also encompasses your wellbeing. You're not going to perform well if you're not sleeping, if you're not eating well, if you don't have food." Accordingly, this in part explains the necessity in programming that helped students access basic needs as a complement to academic support; this helped students develop academic skills in conjunction with a wellness piece. With regards to academic and nonacademic supports, Yakira commented on the triviality of "where one ends and one begins. You really need to consider... and implement both to do [either one] well." Within this model, holistic support of students played a role in fostering organizational improvement. When asked about the resources provided by The Center in terms of student support, Yakira emphasized that Center resources "don't have to be academic" to serve The Center's mission. Likewise, she similarly described student advising (both from herself and from peer mentors) as not "purely academic," but rather a holistic approach to assisting with broader "life situations that the student is dealing with."

Regarding the second aspect of the mental model of holistic support, Yakira was committed to a culture of belonging at The Center. She also noted the role staff played in facilitating this sense of belonging for students, and the role that this culture played in student retention. She explained:

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[The Center] has a lot of resources in terms of retention... There [are] really two pieces to it. Students can leave the university due to academic reasons, or being disqualified, but students could actually be doing well academically and just feel like they're not thriving here, or comfortable here, or feel like they [don't] belong.

Here, Yakira shared that holistic, nonacademic support was equally important as academic support, especially in terms of increasing retention for first-generation students. The goal of Center staff, according to Yakira, is to do the work of “helping students find a space that they feel they belong, a community here.” Key to this goal for Yakira is the belief that “academic success is inextricably tied to ensuring fruitful experiences.”

Mental Model: Leader as Serving Students

The second mental model for Yakira was leader as serving students. Yakira regularly discussed not only the value of serving The Center's students, but also regularly expressed her desire to serve any student who she felt was in need of support, regardless of the demographics of the student. She explained that her

goal is to serve students who have any kind of need and need help in accessing [resources], or have no idea how to access [those resources] and need direction... So we are concerned with making sure that students succeed and that their needs are met.

This mental model was expressed in two ways: (1) a dedication to serving all students regardless of demographic, and (2) a dedication to personal connections with students.

Although Yakira acknowledged that The Center's mission statement specified the target demographic of The Center as first-generation students with an emphasis on the first-year experience and the underrepresented experience, she was much more open to supporting any

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student that felt a need in her daily professional practice. Yakira allowed students to define how they fit in with The Center's target demographic; she expressed that The Center was for any student that felt like they needed it or identified with it or even just liked it. The students that utilize The Center "may or may not identify as first-generation," but, regardless, "everyone that walks in [The Center] values diversity, values support." She explained:

Students who actually don't identify as first-generation college students who still use The Center and feel very comfortable here, we don't turn anyone away. And that could be the case because they identify with the struggles of our first-generation college students. They have an understanding of what that might be like. They feel like this is a good space for them. So, I mean we really do not turn anybody away.

An expression of this mental model of a leader as serving students was through Yakira's dedication to one-on-one interactions with students. Yakira spoke about the importance not only of interacting with students, but persistently interacting with them over time. She explained that she had a unique role out of all the professional staff at The Center because of her full-time status, which afforded her the opportunity to "not only interact with [the] peer mentors every day," but also to interact regularly with students. She discussed the need to make students feel like The Center was a "home" and expressed enthusiasm for students "taking ownership of the space," even when that ownership referred to a student napping on a couch or spreading their textbooks all over an entire table. Regularly interacting with students one-on-one was an important aspect of Yakira's professional practice; she commented on how rewarding it is to "see [the students] grow and develop" and how nice it

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feels when students can “come to us with concerns, with problems” that the staff could provide support on.

Yakira’s Self-Efficacy

Yakira displayed a high-level of leadership self-efficacy, in addition to high self-efficacy in the areas of her two mental models: holistic support for all students and leader as serving students. With regards to being a leader overseeing the day-to-day operation of an HSI-funded Center, Yakira noted that both her Ph.D. and research focus more than qualified her for the role.

For the past seven years, I’ve been doing research on student challenges, student hunger, students of color, first-generation students, ways in which first-generation students and under-served students can be supported, and ways in which the institution can be transformed to support those students. I came from a very academic background.

She noted that compared to her faculty role, keeping up with research relevant to The Center enough to inform her professional practice was “an easy transition... given what I had previously done.” Yakira exhibited some low levels of self-efficacy in terms of feeling “new” to her position, and thus less experienced.

Yakira’s Immunities to Change

A possible immunity to change focused on the relationship between Yakira’s dedication to addressing the identified needs of all student users of The Center on the one hand and reducing identified supports unrelated to The Center’s mission statement on the other hand. Yakira described an instance in which student groups began to request The

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Center space after hours to accommodate extracurricular club events. Yakira explained that she ended up saying ‘yes,’ even though she was uncomfortable with the prospect.

Accommodating the request would mean extra resources and labor would need to be produced to develop a booking system and newly written policies for students using The Center space outside of business hours. Ultimately, Yakira only made the space available outside of business hours on Fridays, after 5:00PM, because she knew students would not partake.

In another instance, Yakira disregarded the extremely popular free printing services offered by The Center, and instead dismissed it as a necessity because it was inconsistent with The Center’s mission statement. The Center discontinued the use of their free printer after a series of technological difficulties; the printer services were so popular that the printer could not handle the load and broke down daily. In discussing the decision to cut the program, Yakira noted that The Center’s mission never purported to be a free printing-center. This example contradicts Yakira’s claim as a proponent for serving student-identified needs. The presence of these contradictory ideas could indicate a potential immunity to change. Keller and Slayton (2016) noted that contradictory beliefs or behaviors within a professional practice can sometimes illustrate an underlying sense of fear which prevents one from seeking direct resolution (an immunity to change).

Yakira’s Practice of Presence

Yakira practiced presence in the areas of day-to-day pragmatic optimizations for The Center as a welcoming and inclusive space, in addition to identifying and responding to student needs. Additionally, she regularly participated in efforts to foster learning and

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communication amongst The Center's staff, including weekly team meetings and regular professional development opportunities. In terms of day-to-day pragmatic optimizations, Yakira discussed multiple instances in which she implemented (sometimes small) changes in The Center in order to maintain, improve upon, or newly foster a sense of welcome and belonging for students. In one instance, she discussed the decision to put up table tents that listed faculty name and office hours to ensure that students felt more at ease in using that service. She also noted the dual purpose in using the table tents to demarcate space in advance of office hours, which ensured that students would not need to be asked to move at the start of programming. This practice ensured that students could continue to "lay out all their study material and just kind of be here for the day" without feeling embarrassed or unwelcome in being asked to move. In another instance, Yakira described how The Center's staff stopped using the term 'dead-week,' which is the colloquial term on campus to describe the week before finals week. She explained, "We don't call it dead week, we call it study and self-care week... it's just a positive spin." Yakira indicated that this language was a subtle reminder to students to remember to meet their own psychosocial and physical needs during what is typically a stressful time for college students. This was consistent with Yakira's mental model of holistic support for all students. Yakira also exhibited a similar reflective approach to language choices in a different example in which she noted that The Center's staff are discouraged from describing their students as 'low-income.' According to Yakira, The Center staff stuck to the term 'first-generation' when describing The Center's target demographic, because "there are some first-generation students that... don't identify as low-

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income,” and she does not want any students to feel like they’re not allowed to partake in offered services. “It’s very much about trying to be as inclusive as possible.”

Yakira also contributed to a practice of presence at The Center through supervisory tactics which encouraged a culture of inquiry, open communication, and an invitation for peer mentors to provide new ideas or concerns on Center programming and services. Yakira discussed the regular training and professional development opportunities provided to The Center’s peer mentors to encourage and foster professional growth. For example, she described one instance in which The Center arranged for a professor to fly out to provide a workshop on peer mentoring. She explained the importance of consistent training throughout the year.

There are trainings every quarter... quite consistently and quite often... I think it’s consistent, but it also takes on different forms, which is a good thing because we don’t just want to give [the peer mentors] the training in the beginning [of the year] and then... not have any additional support throughout the year.

This quote illustrated Yakira’s value of persistent learning opportunities for the staff that she oversaw. Yakira also modeled the behavior of professional learning by partaking in regular opportunities herself. Modeled behavior by leaders can assist in achieving a culture of inquiry within an organization, according to Keller & Slayton (2016).

Yakira also described an important aspect of her duties as a supervisor in promoting the professional development of The Center peer advisors through self-evaluations and supervisory evaluations, which take place twice a year in the Fall and Spring quarters. She explained that the practice ensures “transparency” on her end and provides feedback on areas

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of strengths and improvements. She described this practice as “very much connected to the mission and to the work of The Center.” The evaluations are meant as an “opportunity [for staff] to reflect on... how they’re doing, and for [Yakira] to give them a perspective.” The early evaluation in Fall is meant to provide “direction in terms of how to move forward,” with the Spring evaluation providing a follow-up on how successful changes in practice were implemented. The process of participating in evaluations “is super helpful in terms of [the peer advisor’s] commitment.” The practice of presence incorporates a professional practice which is reflective, collaborative, flexible, and responsive. Yakira’s thoughtful approach to the training opportunities, professional development opportunities, and collaboration opportunities that she provides The Center’s peer advisors as their supervisor not only indicates her own practice of presence, but also indicates her dedication to a broader practice of presence within the organization at large.

Case Comparison: Mada and Yakira

I will now spend some time comparing and contrasting some of the main psychosocial and organizational constructs of mental model, self-efficacy, immunity to change, and presence between the two leaders Mada and Yakira.

Both Mada and Yakira agreed that The Center was designed to meet the needs of first-generation college students; this also echoed The Center’s mission statement, which purported The Center as a learning-centered space to promote the success of first-generation students. They differed, however, in two areas. First, Mada held a mental model of inclusivity and diversity with a particular emphasis on first-generation students. In the last year of this study, Mada noted that The Center should work to be more culturally responsive

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as a means to better capture the needs of the minoritized students who fit within the demographic of first-generation college student. Yakira, however, felt that the definition of The Center's target demographic was, at least in part, student-defined. She acknowledged that programming, space, and advertising were all developed with the needs of first-generation students in mind; yet, she shared that the students who actually partook in these services did not need to be first-generation. Ultimately, Yakira explained that The Center's services were for any student who needed, or even just liked the space. For Mada, inclusivity was an important avenue in capturing as many first-generation students on campus as possible. For Yakira, inclusivity was an important avenue in ensuring that any student who identified with The Center's space, mission, staff, or community would feel welcome.

Both Mada and Yakira exhibited mental models which emphasized a need for the holistic support of first-generation students. However, Mada emphasized The Center as first and foremost a space that offered academic support, whereas Yakira doubted that it was even possible to separate academic and nonacademic supports at all. Mada spoke at length about how the location of The Center within the academic affairs unit drove many of her decisions with regards to programming development and promotional efforts. She valued and acknowledged the need for nonacademic supports, yet specified that the professional staff were "more responsible for thinking about the academic programming." Supports around physical well-being, mental health, and other nonacademic needs were acknowledged, but not prioritized. Yakira, however, spoke extensively on her belief that academic and nonacademic supports were impossible to consider in isolation. She did acknowledge that because of The Center being housed within an academic affairs unit, it was important to

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specifically include the academic component of student support. However, she did not feel limited as a professional staff in how much of her labor efforts should contribute towards holistic supports in the areas of physical, mental, and financial well-being. In this instance, there was a bit of a disconnect in that Mada described all of The Center's professional staff as operating with an academic-oriented focus, yet Yakira did not appear to echo this belief. In isolation, the individual beliefs of each leader did not necessarily indicate an immunity to change. Yet taken together, the differences in mental models with regards to staff responsibility in the area of student support services could indicate dissonance in a shared governance approach, which might act as a potential barrier to change efforts over time.

Overall, Mada demonstrated more instances of professional presence than Yakira within the data. The data indicated instances of presence in the areas of program development and attracting targeted students to The Center, both of which reflect her mental model of inclusivity and diversity with a particular emphasis on first-generation students. She also practiced presence in the area of professional-relationship building, which reflected her mental model of leader as collaborator and supporter. The observation that Mada's instances of presence reflect both of her primary mental models indicate that Mada is successfully utilizing her underlying mental models to drive actual, observable, concrete change efforts within the organization.

Discussion

This study helps the field understand the practice of presence at a Title V Center, and the role this practice played in producing organizational change. First, the findings confirmed that some organizational change efforts at The Center occurred through the collective efforts

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of formalized leaders (Mada and Yakira; Bolman & Deal, 2017; Maxwell et al., 2009; Northouse, 2018). These leaders engaged with the reflective practice of presence (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Slayton & Mathis, 2010) which was cultivated through a culture of inquiry (Senge et al., 2004). This practice of presence entailed the conscientious reflection by staff leaders on the beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors that governed The Center, The Center's staff (including themselves), and The Center's programming (Keller & Slayton, 2016; Senge et al., 2004; Senge, 2006; Slayton & Mathis, 2010). Additionally, the formal staff leaders played a pivotal role in cultivating the culture of inquiry, which drove the practice of presence amongst the leaders themselves and The Center's other organizational staff members. This culture of inquiry was achieved through weekly meetings, event debriefs, professional development opportunities, self-evaluations, semi-annual retreats, and open communication (Slayton & Mathis, 2010), and, for Mada, was specifically driven by a mental model of leader as collaborator and supporter (Keller & Slayton, 2016). Such practices were allocated specifically to provide the staff time to reflect on challenges, brainstorm ideas, and pitch programmatic and organizational alterations. This finding builds on previous research that has found that education leaders enable other organizational members to engage in the practice of presence through the support of positive learning conditions (Collinson et al., 2006).

Further, these findings reveal that the staff leaders' practice of presence, in addition to their cultivation of mental models related to inclusivity, diversity, and a culture of welcome and belonging, contributed to the holistic support of minoritized students at an HSI. Students received support at The Center in the areas of inclusivity on campus and student identity,

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which researchers have attributed as unique challenges for Latinx undergraduate students in the United States (Garcia, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Garcia & Zaragoza, 2020). Furthermore, through the practice of presence, staff leaders provided a unique space on campus for students through the development of academic programming structured around a foundation of cultural and psychosocial validation. This achievement was actuated by mental models centered around diversity and inclusivity, driven by high levels of self-efficacy, informed by research-based practices, (Cooper et al., 2002; Rendon, 1994; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000) and developed and improved over time through the practice of presence. Both Mada's practice of presence to produce a culture of belonging and Yakira's practice of presence to produce a culture of welcoming revealed how the staff leadership contributed to The Center as a safe space for minoritized students. Roberts and Lucas (2020) found that one Title V student center operated as a counterspace, offering students community, safety, and a sense of belonging. These findings add to their work and indicate that professional staff, through the practice of presence, play a vital role in the development of Title V centers as safe, familial, and validating spaces which can provide cocurricular academic, social, and financial supports to minoritized students (Jones et al., 2002; Patton, 2006; Roberts & Lucas, 2020).

The strength of Keller and Slayton's (2016) contextual leadership framework lies in its focus on explaining organizational change through the interaction and intersection of multiple leadership constructs, rather than by any single leadership element on its own. By looking at the ways in which leaders at this Title-V funded center practiced presence through the simultaneous exploration of other constructs, I achieved a fuller, more nuanced picture of the ways in which leaders influenced change efforts for an HSI. Mada's persistent practice of

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presence in the areas of program development, community building, and increasing student engagement were both consistent with her mental models of diversity and inclusivity and leader as collaborator and supporter. Although Mada did illustrate a practice of presence in attracting student engagement to The Center in years one and two of this study, her practice was far more pronounced in year three during the Covid-19 transition. This exemplified the value in the practice of presence as a tool to navigate crises, rapid transitions, and dramatic externally-driven changes. Yakira practiced presence in the areas of fostering a culture of belonging within The Center, which reflected her mental model of holistic support for all students. Interestingly, Yakira exhibited many instances of presence in the area of fostering a culture of inquiry for the staff that she supervised, yet she spoke very little to indicate an underlying mental model in this area. It is possible that such a mental model does exist for Yakira, but the limiting factors of the research project were unable to successfully capture this model within the data. Both Yakira and Mada had high levels of self-efficacy, which drove and motivated the production of a culture of inquiry to cultivate the practice of presence amongst Center staff. Though staff leaders were practicing presence at The Center, this study found that there remained some instances in which a potential immunity to change may have dampened organizational change efforts. Much as in Barnitz and Conley (2020), this study illustrated the complexity of educational staff leadership and its relationship to organizational change. As such, this research contributes to a broader effort to explain and understand the interconnecting contextual factors of leadership which drive organizational change (Barnitz & Conley, 2020; Keller & Slayton, 2016). Furthermore, prior research using the contextual leadership framework and the practice of presence have primarily focused on

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K-12 principals; this research adds to a unique set of literature on higher education staff leaders overseeing a Title V center at an HSI.

Implications

There are both practical and policy implications for this study. A practical implication of this study is related to the observation that Mada's potential immunities to change were related to a lack of shared-governance between campus leaders overseeing The Center. This revelation was surprising considering Mada's mental model of director as collaborator and supporter, and her persistent practice of presence in the area of community building. This observation speaks to the potential need for greater support for non-academic professional leaders to practice both self and organizational-inquiry in a space which both fosters and supports open communication. Yakira, meanwhile, exhibited a practice of presence in the area of fostering inquiry amongst staff, which was not reflective of any present mental models within the data. Further attention might be provided to the ways in which immunities to change and mental models relate to the practice of presence (or lack thereof), and the ways in which presence contributes to a culture of inquiry and successful organizational change efforts. Avenues for two-way communication and a shared-governance approach appeared to be hampered for both Mada and Yakira by external and internal mandates, interpersonal tensions, and broader policy structures present within the University. This observation raises the question as to whether existing structures for staff leaders on campus are sufficient enough to support the practice of professional presence, inquiry processes, and mentorship opportunities for staff leaders.

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A second practical implication is related to staff leaders and their practice of presence, how they mitigate immunities to change, how they develop mental models, and how they can increase self-efficacy. Staff leaders arguably need avenues and structures that provide resources and learning opportunities aimed in supporting and developing these areas. Keller and Slayton (2016) advocated that effective school leaders must be more self-aware of their own mental models, self-efficacy, and immunities to change; ultimately leaders who are set up to achieve organizational change are both aware of such constructs and open to soliciting feedback aimed at overcoming potential immunities. Such opportunities may present as professional development programs designed for staff leaders to learn about what immunities to change are in addition to strategies to practice presence as a daily routine, preferably in a setting aided and supported by peers. Additionally, leaders play a pivotal role in cultivating the practice of presence amongst other organizational members; professional development aimed at teaching leaders how to cultivate presence in others is as equally important as leaders learning the actual practice itself.

A policy implication is related to Title V funding. In terms of these funding efforts, future grants designed around student Centers would benefit from the provision of funding structures which provide professional development for leaders in the areas of presence, immunities to change, mental models, and self-efficacy. Staff leaders need the space and knowledge both to practice presence, and to cultivate the practice of presence in others (Slayton & Mathis, 2010). Likewise, Title-V funding may benefit from the inclusion of structures which support staff inquiry, organizational inquiry, and peer reflection, communication, and community building. Ensuring that staff have the best tools available to

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produce organizational change is a necessity in achieving the overall goals of Title-V, which is to support the academic retention and success of Latinx students in the United States.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of the current study suggest avenues for further research. The sample of participants involved in this case study did not necessarily include all individuals participating in leadership practices within The Center. By the staff participants' own recognition, many of The Center student peer advisors and graduate mentors participated in emergent leadership roles; yet these students were not included in data analysis. This case study sought specifically to comprehend the contextual leadership of non-academic professional staff operating The Center, because they were professionally tasked with fulfilling the Title-V goals. However, future research on the practice of presence amongst Title-V funded student center leaders would benefit from the inclusion of emergent leader data (such as undergraduate peer advisors) to help further illuminate the complex interaction between organizational change and the practice of presence.

A second limitation was the emergence of the contextual leadership framework after the data collection process. This resulted in interview questions that were not tailored specifically to the framework. For instance, questions were not specifically crafted to include immunities to change, mental models, or leader self-efficacy. However, the research team was cognizant of the overarching themes of leadership, organization, and change efforts. In future studies, data could provide a fuller picture of the practice of presence with the inclusion of interview questions that have been crafted specifically towards the constructs of immunities to change, mental models, self-efficacy, and presence. It may be particularly

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beneficial to ask leaders directly what they would describe as their own mental models, or if they could self-describe any potential immunities to change.

Lastly, while Keller and Slayton (2016) recommended a triangulation of interview data, observational data, and artifact data in their conceptual framework, this research project did not include observational data or artifact data. Triangulation instead occurred through the inclusion of a rich corpus of interview data amongst multiple interview participants over a three-year period. While this rich corpus of interview data did provide initial insights into how staff leaders used presence to initiate organizational change, future projects could provide further insight on the practice of presence by looking at corroborating evidence amongst student user data and observation data of staff during pivotal communication and collaboration meetings. It would also be interesting to revisit these same professional staff in a year to see how their perceptions or professional practice have changed, especially given the imminent external changes taking place at The Center with regards to funding and oversight. However, this study provided initial insight as a good starting point to help leaders understand the ways in which multiple constructs interact and intercept in complex ways which can help or hinder organizational change efforts. In particular, this study illustrated the value of practicing presence during volatile situations for organizations such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The purpose of Title-V funding is to support Latinx students in achieving fruitful academic experiences and academic retention in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.); ensuring that the professional staff charged with the oversight of Title V

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funding have the necessary support to practice professional presence will help assure that Latinx students are directly benefiting from Title V funding. Through the production and growth of student programming, material support, cocurricular academic support, advisory support, and community building support offered by the continuous practice of professional presence, staff leaders will be better prepared to succeed in organizational change efforts in support of Latinx students at HSIs.

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Appendix A

Staff Interview Protocol

Introduction:

“Is it OK if we record this focus group? We want to thank you for taking part in this research project and for talking with us about your experiences with The Center. I want to assure you that what you say will be held in confidence. Your responses will only be shared with members of the research team, and when we report on the project, we will use pseudonyms rather than real names. Also, if there are any questions that you would prefer not to answer, just let me know and we’ll skip them and move on. Do you have any questions before we get started?”

Section 1-Background Questions:

1. Could you please tell me what your position is with The Center (TC)?
2. How long have you been in this position?
3. What are your job responsibilities with this position?
4. What training did you have for this position?
5. What professional development are you provided for this position?
6. What support do you feel you need in order to successfully implement your job responsibilities?
7. Have you had or currently have other positions here at the university?
8. What were you doing prior to this Student position?

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Section 2-StudentCenter:

Student Center Structure:

1. Could you please briefly describe to me what The Center is [from your perspective]?
2. What services does The Center provide?
3. How do you decide which services and programming to offer?
4. How are services and programs implemented?
5. How do you attract students to The Center?
1. How do you target URM, Low-income, and first gen students?
6. Describe for me the population of students utilizing The Center.
7. In what ways do you support the academic needs of the students who utilize The Center?
8. In what ways do you support the non-academic needs of the students who utilize The Center?
9. What are the goals of the Student Center?
10. How are these goals communicated with your peer mentors and students who utilize The Center?
11. How often and to what extent do you interact with the students who utilize the center?
12. How often and to what extent do you interact with the peer mentors?

Evaluation:

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1. What do you think are the strengths of The Center?
2. What areas of improvement would you like to see in The Center?
 15. How do you evaluate the success of the students who utilize The Center?
 16. What is your perception on student experience with The Center?
 17. Is there a platform for students to provide feedback on their experience with The Center?