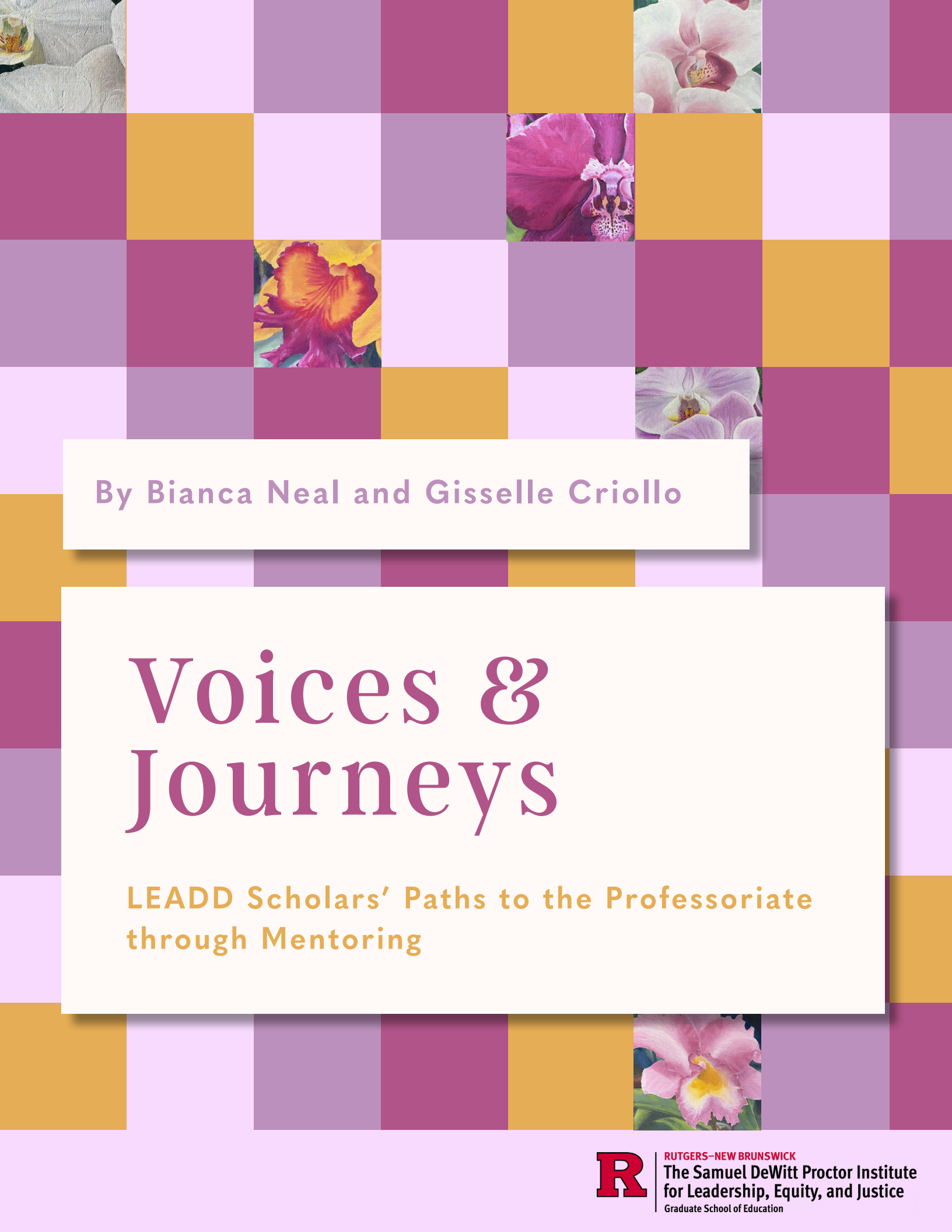




By Bianca Neal and Gisselle Criollo

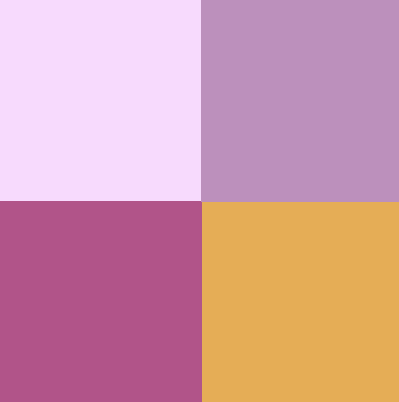
Voices & Journeys

LEADD Scholars' Paths to the Professoriate
through Mentoring



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK

The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute
for Leadership, Equity, and Justice
Graduate School of Education



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2024), the Hispanic population in the United States has grown substantially, now accounting for 19.5% of the total population. Hispanic Americans are also the fastest-growing demographic in advanced-degree attainment, with a notable 291% increase in Hispanic women earning advanced degrees (Mora & Lopez, 2023). Yet despite these gains, Latinas remain profoundly underrepresented among college and university faculty, comprising only 3% of full-time faculty members (NCES, 2024). This disparity underscores the urgency of early-intervention programs along the academic pathway.

The Latinas Excelling at Doctoral Degrees (LEADD) program was created to address this inequity by equipping undergraduate students with the personal and professional skills necessary to pursue doctoral studies and careers as professors. Through its innovative virtual mentoring model, LEADD has provided structured guidance at a critical stage, transforming uncertainty into agency and preparing students to succeed in academia. Since its inception in 2022, LEADD has supported 21 dedicated Scholars as they advance toward careers in higher education.



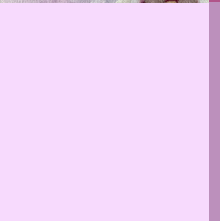
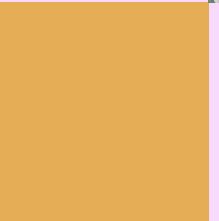
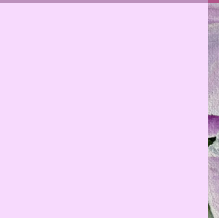
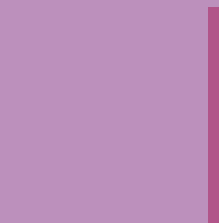
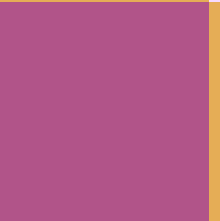
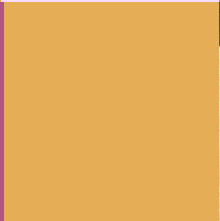
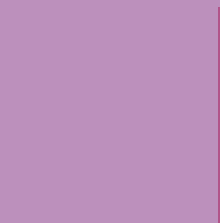
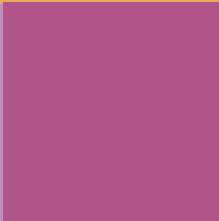
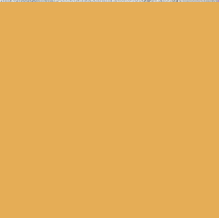
This report documents the voices and journeys of LEADD Scholars, capturing the motivating factors that inspire them to pursue an academic life as well as the messages they received regarding pursuing a career as a professor. Findings revealed that Scholars were motivated by several key factors, including faculty and mentor influence, family support, a commitment to giving back, and a passion for teaching and education. Through LEADD, they gained the knowledge and tools to navigate the Ph.D. process, built social capital, and developed confidence in their academic abilities and research interests.

Overall, the report demonstrates an evidence-based approach to intentional undergraduate mentoring. By cultivating an empowering environment enriched by mentor professors and graduate students, LEADD fostered holistic personal and professional development, serving as both a foundation for systemic change and a transformative force in Scholars' journeys. Ultimately, this study highlights how investing in Latina undergraduates ensures that the future of higher education reflects and serves the communities it represents.



INTRODUCTION

Latinas are among the fastest-growing groups earning advanced degrees, yet they remain strikingly underrepresented in higher education faculty roles, comprising only 3% of full-time faculty (Mora & Lopez, 2023; NCES, 2024). This gap extends beyond individual careers and limits who shapes knowledge, mentors students, and advocates within institutions. When Latinas are absent from faculty roles, higher education continues to reproduce systemic inequities, and communities lose critical voices positioned to challenge them (Gonzales & Saldivar, 2020, p. 130). Without deliberate intervention, this pattern will continue, leaving classrooms without the diverse perspectives they need.



TERMINOLOGY

To properly frame this conversation, it is important to establish the terminology used throughout our report. References to “Latina” or “Hispanic woman” are used interchangeably, though we recognize the complexity of these classifications.

Identity labels within the Hispanic community often vary across immigrant generations and contexts. Research shows that about half of Hispanic adults most often describe themselves by their family’s country of origin or heritage – using terms such as Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Salvadoran. Another 39% prefer pan-ethnic identifiers, such as Hispanic or Latino, which are more commonly used in the U.S. (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2021).

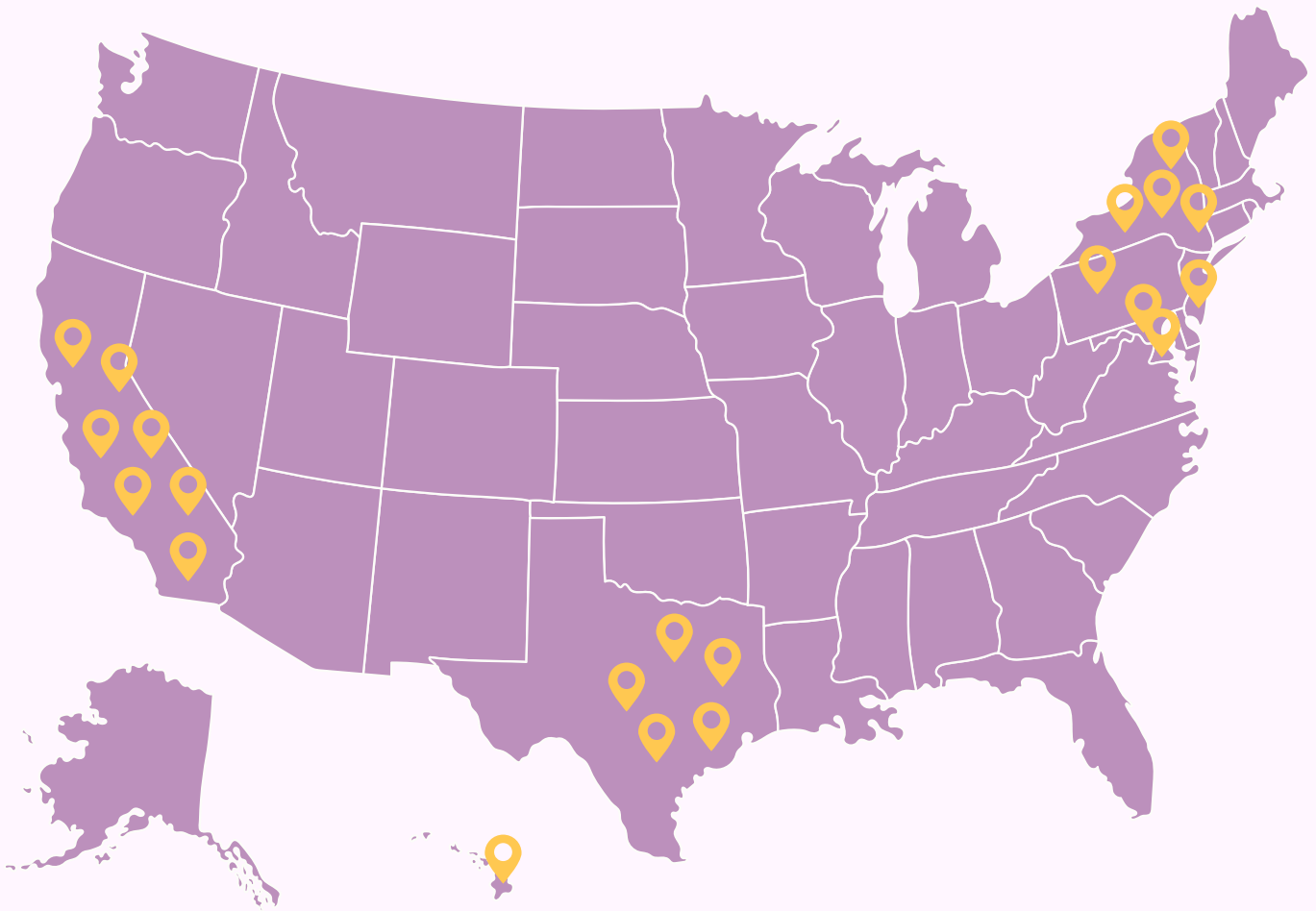
Regional differences also shape usage: “Hispanic” is more prevalent in the eastern United States, while “Latino” is more common in the western United States. These distinctions highlight the fluidity of identity and the importance of context in terminology (Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, 1997; Lopez et al., 2020).

ABOUT LEADD

LEADD, which stands for Latinas Excelling at Doctoral Degrees, originated as a virtual mentoring program designed to bridge the gap in support for undergraduate students pursuing Ph.D.s. LEADD uplifted students by fostering confidence, affirming their research interests, sharing helpful resources, and promoting a collaborative community to combat cultural and academic isolation. Participants in the program, known as LEADD Scholars, engaged in a virtual peer support community through monthly online sessions. These sessions aimed to strengthen pathways to the professoriate and included workshops conducted by professors and graduate students, offering strategies and tools to navigate academia successfully.



DEMOGRAPHICS



The LEADD program was open to any student studying at any 2-year college or 4-year institution within any field in the United States. The map represents the location of the universities attended by the 21 LEADD Scholars across the three cohorts. The LEADD students represented universities in California, Texas, Maryland, Hawaii, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The LEADD program provided a valuable research opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of undergraduate Latinas who self-identify as Latinas and desire to pursue a doctorate and become a professor. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted interviews with LEADD Scholars (cohorts 1, 2, and 3) throughout 2025 to gather insights into their academic journeys. For confidentiality purposes, the interviewees were assigned pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity. Before program participation, we surveyed all Scholars from 2022 to 2025, administering pre- and post-program surveys. In the surveys, we asked questions about their motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree, their challenges and accomplishments, and their aspirations to become a professor. These data, coupled with their application materials, represented the first stage of data collection. We interviewed two Scholars from the first cohort, two participants from the second cohort, and six participants from the third cohort, for a total of 10 LEADD Scholars.

Using this research approach, our report contributes to the existing literature on the pre-professoriate pipeline for Latina undergraduates who aspire to become professors. While existing studies focus on retention in graduate school or on barriers to tenure-track positions, this report highlights the formative motivations that prompted LEADD scholars to pursue careers as professors and the messages at the undergraduate stage that they received about higher education as a career option.

After completing the interviews, we transcribed the audio recordings, coded the transcripts, and identified emergent themes in the data (Saldana, 2021). We followed up with all previous cohorts to request an update on their academic status.



CORE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our research report answers the following research question: What key factors motivated LEADD Scholars to pursue careers as professors, and what messages did they receive about higher education as a career option?

FINDINGS

While academic researchers have explored diversity in graduate education and faculty hiring, the undergraduate phase of the professoriate pipeline, particularly concerning Latina students, remains under-researched (Gasman & Perdomo, 2024). There is a notable lack of insight into their motivations and the narratives that influence their paths to academia. Below, we highlight the motivations and messages that shaped Latina students who participated in the LEADD program in their pursuit of the professoriate.

MOTIVATING FACTORS AND MESSAGING

Based on the interviews, the main motivating factors influencing Scholars' decisions to pursue careers in academia, particularly as professors, include: 1) the influence of mentors and role models; 2) the desire to make a positive impact in their communities; 3) family members; 4) a passion for teaching and education; 5) involvement in research or mentoring programs; and 6) a commitment to addressing the issue of underrepresentation. While these factors are categorized under specific themes below, it is essential to note that many Scholars identified a combination of influences rather than relying on a single factor.



Mentorship & Role Models

Significant influence from professors who invested in scholars' personal and professional growth



Community Impact

Desire to make positive changes through research, mentoring, and community initiatives



Family Influence

Inspiration from family members who served as role models or motivation to be first in the family



Passion for Teaching

Love for education and a desire to teach at higher levels



Research Programs

Involvement in research or mentorship programs that exposed scholars to academic possibilities



Addressing Underrepresentation

Lack of Latina representation fueled a commitment to advancing representation in higher education



Faculty Mentors and Role Models

Professors who served as mentors inspired LEADD Scholars to pursue careers in academia. Despite their different academic majors, many of these Scholars had a similar experience: at least one professor at their university who actively invested in their personal and professional growth. The mentor-mentee relationship, primarily between professors and undergraduate students, was crucial and often characterized by a profound level of concern, care, and support for both professional and personal development.

For example, Gabriela, a LEADD Scholar in cohort three, discovered and embraced her purpose as a future professor thanks to her mentor's guidance. This mentor not only helped her find her path but also inspired her to give back by mentoring others. Her professor served as a vital source of encouragement and played a transformative role in her belief in what was possible. She had previously struggled to recognize her own potential, but her mentor inspired her to pursue opportunities she had once considered unattainable. Gabriela shared:

It was my mentors who focused on me and wanted me to succeed, although they didn't know my backstory. It didn't matter to them. They saw what I didn't see... they saw the potential... they saw more... (Now) I see what they saw. I see the potential. I see how much I've thrived and how certain I feel that I want to be a professor.

In many instances, these mentoring relationships exemplified how mentoring could inform paths to success that individuals might not see on their own, ultimately empowering them to achieve their goals. Kristine, a LEADD Scholar in cohort one, also attributed her success to her mentors:

I had a lot of mentors that pushed me and saw potential in me that I didn't think that I had. I wouldn't be here without them. I want to thank everyone for that as well. I believe, for me as a Latina and a first-generation student, we need that encouragement and empowerment from mentors. To give us that little push, because we are going through things in our own personal lives, and sometimes we can doubt ourselves. And without our mentors or anyone giving us insight on how to continue and believe in us, we might not believe in ourselves.

Overall, these Scholars experienced professors who actively mentored them by helping them identify their strengths and providing guidance.

In some cases, the LEADD Scholars noted that they had multiple mentors encouraging them. However, as seen with Iris, a LEADD Scholar in cohort three, simply seeing a Latina professor during her class lecture was transformative for her. This experience highlighted the importance of representation, reshaping her understanding of what is achievable in academia. In her words:

The biggest reason I want to become a professor is that I walked into my Chicano studies class - this huge class, it was like a 500-seat class, and I saw my professor, and she was Latina. I looked at her, and I was just like, 'Oh my God! We can become professors?' I didn't even think about that. And the way she spoke, this woman walked across that stage and was like, 'This is the research that I'm doing.' I was like, 'You can research this?!' It was an epiphany.

The representation of a Latina professor in Iris's undergraduate class profoundly transformed her perception of what was possible for her academic journey. This experience, shared by many of those we interviewed, emphasizes the critical role that representation plays in education.

Not only do mentors and role models, such as professors, significantly influence students' academic paths, but also their aspirations, beyond earning their doctorate. Inspired by these pivotal relationships, the students often felt compelled to offer similar support and encouragement to their peers, fostering a cycle of empowerment within the academic community.

Besides mentoring from faculty, support from additional positive role models, such as family members and educational leaders, was crucial to instilling confidence in students and fostering

their belief in their potential for success in academic careers. Kristine, for example, also noted that consistent motivation from her mentors opened doors for personal growth and inspired her to continue her studies, even in the face of external challenges. She shared:

They kept on motivating me to continue my higher education. I didn't see where I fit in, but I know that they kept on pushing me into all these organizations. I had a mentor who kept on asking me to apply to the student success department, and that's how I got my first job in higher education at the college.

Overall, the encouragement and support from leaders and mentors, particularly in educational settings, further inspired these individuals to overcome challenges and pursue their goals, even from an early age. Victoria, a LEADD Scholar in cohort three, shared that multiple support systems helped push her forward, including two early on educators in her youth:

Of course, I have my family, and they are very supportive and would give me affirmations to make me feel good and confident, but I think those two teachers really helped me hit the ballpark and keep going. I was like, I don't care what anyone says. I'm doing what I want, whether you like it or not, and I just feel like it, because they really believed in me.



Many of the LEADD Scholars were inspired by mentors and role models who played key roles in supporting them, highlighting their strengths, and recognizing their potential, as Victoria's story illustrates.

At the same time, while many LEADD Scholars shared uplifting stories about their professors at their respective universities, Lucy recalled a discouraging message from a mentor prior to joining LEADD who advised her against pursuing a career in academia because of the challenges Latina academics face in securing employment. Elaborating further on her experience, Lucy recalled:

I told her how I wanted to become a professor to teach at the college level, and she responded, 'It's very difficult to get into a graduate program. I did it, and I still had trouble.' When I expressed my desire to stay on the West Coast, she said, 'Well, if I didn't get a job on the West Coast, what makes you think you will?' I was taken aback that a Latina mentor, who was meant to guide me, would approach the conversation this way. I felt she could have offered more supportive advice, suggesting alternative opportunities out of state or in the Midwest. When I asked her if she knew anyone who secured a job on the West Coast, she mentioned that her friends did, which struck me as contradictory.

After that conversation, I started to think, 'Maybe she's right. If she didn't get a job, why should I even try?' Since I wanted to remain on the West Coast, I shifted away from the idea of being a professor and towards teaching, as I knew there was high demand for teachers there due to turnover rates.

Nevertheless, later in Lucy's sophomore year, her outlook began to transform. Thanks to a special program designed for migrant farmworker children, which prepared them for higher education, Lucy encountered more Latina professors who recognized her aspirations. They acknowledged the challenges she would face but encouraged her, assuring her that pursuing her goals was indeed possible. This newfound support reignited her determination, despite the earlier discouragement that she endured.

The aforementioned experiences shared by the Scholars spanned K-12 systems and university classrooms, highlighting the meaningful mentoring provided by professors and faculty. This guidance enabled students to navigate challenges and stay focused on their goals. As a result of these influential relationships, many of these students were also inspired to offer similar support and encouragement to others.

Additionally, LEADD Scholars currently in graduate school described how they found empowerment after LEADD through narratives shared by Latinx academic influencers on social media. While not replacing the need for community, these “scholar-influencers” significantly shaped these students’ beliefs about their potential to pursue doctorates and navigate higher education. Katie, a LEADD Scholar in cohort 1, emphasized the emergence of a different discourse on social media platforms surrounding Latinas, noting,

The new narrative forming, which is that Latinas are capable and empowered, is coming from social media. And these academic influencers who are Latinas and in PhD programs... just seeing how much their following has grown has been very thrilling and empowering. Not only am I following these pages, but also people from my undergrad who are doing so many great things. They’re having Zoom sessions about financial aid workshops and the college admissions process, especially at the graduate level, which has been really interesting.

For Katie and many LEADD Scholars, this visibility sparked a strong sense of possibility about their future career aspirations. By publicly sharing their stories and the tools needed to navigate the academic landscape, these scholar-influencers not only helped others on similar journeys by breaking stereotypes, disrupting narratives, and shaping new ones, but were also seen as paving the way for greater representation and recognition among younger students within the academic community.

The combined influence of mentoring, role models, family support, and the rise of Latinx academic social media influencers empowers Scholars, instills confidence, fosters resilience, and reshapes perceptions of academic success for Latina Scholars.

Leveraging Academic Influence to Enrich Communities

A key motivating factor expressed by the LEADD Scholars is their desire to create a positive impact in their communities through their academic work. They frequently emphasize their commitment to mentoring students and guiding them as they pursue their aspirations. They also highlighted the importance of valuing the input and needs of community members rather than imposing their own ideas. Ultimately, they shared a desire to use their research and grant-writing skills in their roles as professors to also secure funding for community projects, allowing community members to be part of the practical solutions for real-world problems.

Lucy, a LEADD Scholar in the second cohort, articulated her goal of using her future professorship to leverage her title, research expertise, and critical skills in applying for grants that would benefit the community. She stressed the necessity of professors being actively involved in their communities, rejecting the notion of a passive, detached researcher who benefits from others' struggles. She noted:

When you have a professorship, you can use your title, research, and critical skills to write grants, bringing those resources to the community so they can do whatever they wish with those funds. I don't want to impose my ideas on them because they are the ones doing the hard work. I definitely want to achieve this in my future professorship.

Similarly, Sofia, a LEADD Scholar in the first cohort, reflected on how being an academic can be a form of activism. She expressed her desire to uplift not only people like her but also those who have been underserved. She shared:

I know that academia can also be a form of activism, and the work I'm doing to uplift people like me, as well as those with other marginalized identities, is something I will continue to pursue with the support of those who believe that love prevails and hope is vital.

The Scholars demonstrated a deep commitment to giving back to their communities, recognizing that they could make a positive societal contribution through their academic endeavors. Many stressed the significance of being rooted in their communities, echoing Lucy's sentiments, and the impact they could achieve through their research.

The Scholars' commitment to research that serves the greater good reflects a shared drive to have a positive impact on the academic landscape, despite their differing motivations. For some, this desire is innate, and for others, it stems from religious and family values, modeled behavior,

mentoring experiences, personal encounters with support or kindness, and the aspiration to create pathways for future students. For instance, Kristine articulated how her faith-based upbringing inspired her to “give back” and be a mentor and academic leader:

I was raised in a Catholic, Christian, family-oriented environment. That leader was always within me, but I needed to find where it fit into my life. The mentors I had showed me that I want to be that mentor back. The best place to do this is in higher education. I learned the importance of giving back from church. I was always helping others, and being a servant has always been in my heart. To me, being a leader is an action, but being a servant is my identity. I want to leave a legacy of serving others, putting them first.

Iris shared a similar desire to give back, which was inspired by a transformative experience in another research program:

When I talk about paying it forward, I mean that once I become a professor and a researcher writing various articles, I want to create an environment on campus where my students feel seen, heard, and represented. I want them to feel empowered to pay it forward and carve a path for future students like me.

Likewise, Lucy reflected on how her parents instilled the value of giving back through their hard work and kindness towards others. She conveyed:

My parents always taught us to be very humble. Despite what we had, we always wanted to give back in some way. I saw this vividly growing up with my mom, especially when we encountered unhoused individuals. She would always ask if they wanted something to eat, and we would take them with us to buy food. My parents worked in the fields for over 30 to 40 years, and throughout that time, they consistently shared resources with one another. They helped each other out, organized fundraisers, and set up yard sales. This upbringing helped shape my understanding of what it means to give back.

Overall, the insights from the LEADD Scholars demonstrate a profound dedication to positively shaping their communities through their academic paths and mentor roles. They seek to work as professors and use their knowledge to improve their communities and the world.



Honoring Family Members

Family members played a significant role in inspiring LEADD Scholars to pursue careers as professors, but the nature of that influence varied by students' generational backgrounds. While the program primarily attracted first-generation students, it also included second- and third-generation students. For first-generation Scholars, their inspiration often stemmed from the desire to create new opportunities for their families and honor their parents' sacrifices. In contrast, second- and third-generation students tended to be motivated by a legacy of academic achievement and the influence of family members who themselves had pursued higher education. Thus, while family influence was strong across the board, the reasons for pursuing a career in academia varied by generation.

First Generation Perspective

Many first-generation LEADD Scholars felt that they were breaking new ground for their families, as they were the first in their lineage to attend college. They often voiced a desire to honor their parents, who immigrated to the United States in search of a better life. They aimed to give back to their parents by achieving success and providing a sense of security, acknowledging the sacrifices their parents made and the support they offered throughout their lives. One such example is Kristine, who stated her motivation by saying she wanted to show her family that “it is possible to go back to school, get your degree, and become something.”

Similarly, Lucy highlighted how family inspired her educational journey:

My second motivator was my family. Being able to say that they have a doctor and pursuing the highest level of education here in the United States was a significant motivator for me. My parents came here for a better life, and I felt this was my way of giving back to them. I want to ensure that they feel safe and secure knowing their children have succeeded. They have always worried about us, making sure we were fed, had somewhere to stay, and had clothes.

These LEADD Scholars drew considerable inspiration from their family members on their journey towards becoming professors, and their interviews showcased the unique ways these familial influences shaped their choices.





Second - Third Generation Student Perspective

Regarding the second-and third-generation students, they expressed a desire to continue the legacy of determination established by their relatives, who had already earned degrees. Although these family members may not have held doctoral degrees, they played a pivotal role in motivating these Scholars to pursue one. Some Scholars mentioned that witnessing their relatives achieve significant academic milestones, such as a bachelor's or master's degree, motivated them to succeed academically. For instance, Sophia, a LEADD Scholar in cohort three, stated that, in addition to mentors during her undergraduate college experience, her mom obtaining her master's degree "was really big," and she "wanted to do the same."

Other Scholars, such as Victoria, who was part of the second cohort of LEADD Scholars, noted the influence her mother and grandmother (whom she affectionately calls her mamá) had on her decision to pursue higher education. Despite facing substantial obstacles and societal expectations discouraging women from attending college, her grandmother pursued her education with determination. Her grandmother was the "only girl in her family to go to college" after earning a Scholarship to an all-women's college in New York. Both of Victoria's grandparents moved from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland, and her great-grandfather (her grandmother's father) strongly believed women should not go to college; he wanted her to marry instead. Her grandmother was headstrong, defied expectations, and pursued higher education, ultimately inspiring Victoria. In

addition to her grandmother, both her mother and aunt had successful careers in education, serving as her role models. Reflecting on her mother's decision to obtain a bachelor's degree as a parent, she shared: "My mom's journey is not traditional, but she still managed to do it. And you know, she's doing awesome work, and hearing the experiences and stories I've been told just motivated me."

In addition to familial influences, Victoria also noted the impact of community support and her grandmother's teaching, which contributed to her motivation to become a professor. She shared how "amazing" it was to hear the impact of her grandmother's work and how people would talk about her grandmother, who taught entire generations of families. She elaborated:

I would go to Costco with my mamá and my mom, and my mamá would get stopped (by people), saying, Oh, my gosh! How are you? How's your family? And like, you know, that person that she was talking to was just like you, literally, you know, taught my daughter, my granddaughter, my great, great granddaughter, like things like that, and that goes on beyond generations. And like, now you know, the students that she taught are doing awesome, amazing things, and that was always so cool to me, because it's just like she was giving back to her community.

As illustrated by these stories, family members significantly influenced the LEADD Scholars' decisions to become professors, underscoring the varied ways family support has shaped their academic paths.





Complex Messages of Support around Educational Attainment Among Family Members

Along with family support being a motivational factor, Scholars had complex stories about the messages they received from their families during their educational journeys. The nuances in the messaging meant that their families sometimes encouraged them and at other times discouraged them, depending on where they were on the path. This finding illustrates that familial influence is nuanced and more complex than an overgeneralization that family members were either always supportive or never supportive.

For example, some LEADD Scholars shared that while their families initially supported their bachelor's degree as a means to securing better job prospects, family members raised concerns when these Scholars chose to pursue a higher degree beyond the undergraduate level. Family members expressed apprehension about the time commitment required to pursue advanced degrees. One scholar reflected on this duality, noting that her family was generally supportive of her goal to earn a doctorate but struggled to grasp the extensive time commitment involved to obtain an additional degree that would not immediately lead to employment, nor could they see a direct pathway to employment. While family members expressed concerns and questioned the time commitment and sacrifices that pursuing an advanced degree would require of their loved ones, these students sought external support. They did not relent on their goals and advocated for themselves within their family units.

On a related note, Gabriela shared her experience grappling with the unspoken messaging around household norms and expectations while balancing her home life and academic responsibilities. Her family was supportive, but she wrestled with balancing familial responsibilities with the academic expectations set by her household. Gabriela candidly recounted her transformative journey of navigating these competing demands while living at home during her college years. Through this experience, she learned invaluable lessons in resilience and prioritization, which shaped her academic success and personal growth. Her experience, she shared, was largely influenced by the gender and cultural norms within her family. She explained:

I am the only woman in the house aside from my mom, so I am responsible for household duties. Although I have siblings and we share responsibilities, I still felt like there was this little burden: when we get home, I have to cook for the family and clean the dishes. There was always more than just school on my mind because I prioritized all household duties and everyone's physical well-being over my education. Then I would fall behind on assignments or feel overloaded—like, too stressed out. So I had to learn to balance it. This involved communicating with my family, trying to figure out a work schedule—in a sense, a chore schedule—and adjusting it. Sometimes, when I didn't have enough energy to do what was on my schedule, I just had to call it a day, close the laptop, and order takeout. At first, I felt guilty. But then I learned that money comes and goes; that was another thing. The cycle of poverty that I grew up in was significant. But yeah, I had to tell myself, "It's okay to say, 'No, I can't do this today'" and push it aside.

Though Gabriela did not have direct opposition from her family, the caregiving role she was expected to fulfill challenged her and affected her stress levels. These responsibilities were an unspoken obligation that initially overshadowed her educational commitments, leading to stress and feelings of being overwhelmed until she began communicating and planning with her family. She struggled to find balance, set boundaries, and understand the importance of self-care. Feelings like this often led to internal conflict for many, as they had to navigate cultural expectations from their families while prioritizing their academic and career goals, which sometimes seemed to conflict with those expectations. Similarly, Scholars noted the struggle to balance honoring family household traditions of staying close to home with the desire to pursue education elsewhere.

Conversely, other Scholars highlighted the supportive roles their parents played in their academic pursuits. Katie, noted that, despite the “stereotype that first-generation students often navigate higher education alone,” her parents provided a solid emotional support system during challenging times. She remarked,

My parents have been my emotional support system while I navigated feelings of isolation in my early undergraduate years. I’ve explained my career aspirations to them, and they encouraged me every step of the way. Even though they didn’t attend college themselves, they understand its importance and have seen the countless hours I’ve dedicated to my job and my studies. They are my motivation for everything.

The impact of family opinions on these Scholars’ educational experiences became apparent throughout their interviews. Family interactions played a crucial role in shaping their resilience in academic pursuits, whether those exchanges were supportive or critical of their college and post-grad decisions. For instance, Kristine found that the absence of support from one of her parents motivated her even more, driving her to succeed and prove them wrong. Despite the emotional toll of pursuing her goals without their backing, she found motivation in the desire to set a strong example for her own children. As she articulated:

I just feel like sometimes my dad can be supportive, and sometimes he cannot, but I know what I’m doing is for my children, so they can see me being a good leader in society. They can do it too because I am the first in my family to earn a degree.

Altogether, as illustrated, it is imperative to discuss how to navigate between familial obligations and academic goals because while family support can be a motivating factor, the messages Scholars receive from their families are nuanced.



The Love of Teaching and Being an Educator

Throughout their interviews, LEADD Scholars consistently emphasized a passion for teaching as a key motivation for pursuing a career in academia. Some Scholars, for instance, attributed their love for teaching to tutoring family members during elementary school. In contrast, others recounted an interest in becoming a high school teacher as early as their teenage years. It was not until they entered a college classroom, though, that they realized they could pursue a career as a professor.

As an example, Daniela, a LEADD Scholar in cohort three, experienced a transformative moment while working with a group of high school students. From an early age, she felt a strong calling to be a teacher, but her aspirations evolved during her college years. A pivotal experience occurred when she taught at a high school while also working at an off-campus daycare to earn her Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. This marked a turning point in her journey toward becoming a professor.

During this time, Daniela discovered her true passion for teaching. She reflected, “I was determined to become a teacher. I wanted to help these kids and change the system. I knew I had to take action.” As she progressed through college, an important realization struck her: she could be a teacher while also pursuing a career as a professor. She recognized that professors not only teach but also influence and inspire students in profound ways. This revelation, supported by a mentor and an influential figure in the education system, helped her see that her pathway to teaching extended beyond K-12 classrooms. She shared her thoughts on this epiphany:

At first, I was certain that I just wanted to be a teacher in a K-12 setting. I was devoted to helping these kids and making a difference. But then, as I started college, I realized, oh snap, my professors are the ones teaching me! I can also become a professor and impact students in that way. That was the first spark that ignited my ambition.

Isabella expressed similar sentiments regarding her transition from wanting to be an elementary or high school teacher to aspiring to become a professor. Since early childhood, she has had a passion for education. However, her perspective changed when she participated in a college program that demonstrated that research opportunities exist beyond Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.

This experience sparked her interest in both education and research and prompted her to consider a career as a professor. She understood that pursuing a Ph.D. would be necessary to achieve her goal and was driven by a strong desire to conduct research that benefited the community. She stated,

It became clear to me during my first year in college that I wanted to pursue graduate studies, as this was the pathway to becoming a professor. I didn't know much about it at the time, but I knew I wanted to engage in research, and I really wanted to do it for my community.

Another LEADD scholar, Lucy, discovered her love for teaching at an early age. She said, "I love teaching. I love teaching others. I realized that in elementary school. My family always brings up the fact that when I was learning English, because my first language is Spanish, I would also do after-school tutoring in elementary school. Then, whatever I had in my binder, I would always bring it back and try to teach my grandma in English." Similarly, Sophia also expressed how her perception of her career in education as a teacher in the future changed once she entered college:

I did think I was gonna stop at just being a high school teacher. Then coming to college and seeing all the greater work I could do, it opened up my mind to the possibilities... the further I could take the teaching experience, like I could also be producing pieces of work and writing. I could have my name on a book, which just seems so crazy to me. But now it is a goal that I really want to achieve.

Collectively, the interviews show that these LEADD Scholars had a strong interest in teaching, which motivated them to become professors.



Participation in Educational Outreach and Research Preparation Programs

Mentoring programs designed to introduce college students to research also emerged as a motivating factor for the LEADD Scholars. Lucy, a LEADD Scholar in the second cohort, mentioned her college's program, which, at the time, helped incoming first- year students develop through active participation with peers, faculty, peer mentors, and academic advisors. The program formerly supported students as they transitioned to college and provided opportunities to engage in research beyond traditional lab settings. It exposed this scholar to various research methodologies, including those in the humanities and social sciences, sparking an interest in her own academic research. A LEADD Scholar in cohort three, Isabella shared:

I came in not knowing you could do research outside of just lab research, so (in my university program) they gave us examples of what humanities and social science research may look like, and I feel like, through that, I was like, Oh, my gosh! I didn't know I could conduct observations like pláticas and that would be a study on its own. So, I think after like my first year, I think that's just what sparked, just like being in a program like that.

Scholars Lucy and Isabella had similar perspectives, which they highlighted when discussing their experiences in research programs designed for first-generation students of color. Those programs sparked their interest in research and academia, showing them that they could conduct research in areas beyond STEM.

Addressing the Gaps in Underrepresentation

LEADD Scholars were motivated to pursue careers as professors by the significant underrepresentation of Latinas in higher education, particularly in collegiate classrooms. Building on previous discussions about the importance of role models, especially Latina professors, each scholar emphasized the need for representation, the desire to learn from shared personal experiences and struggles, and the desire to positively impact future generations. For example, Katie, a LEADD Scholar in cohort one, recognized her desire to become a future role model after an instrumental experience with a Latina professor during her academic journey. One particular professor made a lasting imprint and showed her that becoming a professor was attainable. Katie said:

There's not really a lot of Latinas within those areas in the field of Education. And I had only one Latina professor during my undergraduate time, and she was awesome. I still contact her to this day, but just even having that one Latina professor changed everything for me... That is an inspiration that I can be one day.

While some scholars emphasized the significance of representation, highlighting the scarcity of Latina professors, they also expressed a commitment to sharing their personal stories and struggles to inspire future students and to demonstrate that success is attainable regardless of one's background. Ava, a LEADD Scholar in cohort three, also shared her experience of not having any Latina professors during her undergraduate studies and how that absence affected her aspirations. She felt a strong desire to become a mentor and role model for future students, particularly within her community. During her interview, she emphasized the significance of representation in academia and expressed her commitment to giving back to her community by inspiring and supporting others. She said:

Honestly, the biggest one is just making a difference and a difference in representation. I think, obviously, taking the experiences that you know, I've never had a professor who is Latina. I think that's where I was like, damn, like, you know - Really, it's representation that obviously makes a huge difference.

Isabella described similar sentiments as she reflected on the lack of Latinas in higher education:

But I knew I wanted to do research, and I guess I just really wanted to do it for my community, because I know there was also just like no representation of Latinas in higher education. I think so far in college, I've only had one Latina professor, which is kind of crazy. I think that just made me want to also push, to also gain higher numbers, and to also have higher numbers and represent my community, while also doing research for my community, at the same time.

To add depth to the layer of representation, Kristine mentioned that it was also about the story behind the mentor's journey that inspired her. For her, representation extends beyond simply placing someone in a position of authority who shares a similar identity. It's about weaving together stories that illuminate the challenges and triumphs encountered along the way, fostering a deeper understanding and a sense of belonging. As she said, "When you see someone, let's say they're in a high position, they're Latina or Latino - but it's their story that makes a way bigger impact than just showing yourself."

The lack of Latina representation in higher education was often mentioned in the interviews. Overall, they not only acknowledged the disparities and their awareness of these issues, but it also fueled their dedication to advancing representation in higher education.

In summary, the LEADD Scholars emphasized that their decision to pursue academic careers, especially as professors, is driven by a blend of factors rather than a single factor. These include the transformative influence of mentors and role models, a strong desire to drive positive change in their communities, family support, a deep passion for teaching, engagement in research and mentorship programs, and a commitment to address underrepresentation in higher education. Overall, their interviews highlight nuances and complexities that make these factors most impactful.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences and insights gained from the LEADD program highlight the necessity of structured support systems for aspiring Scholars. By reframing underrepresentation as an opportunity for early support instead of an individual shortcoming, we can cultivate an environment that nurtures potential and fosters success. To build upon the achievements of the LEADD program and effect meaningful change, universities and institutional leaders should consider implementing a multifaceted approach that includes the following:

Structure Intergenerational Mentoring Focused on Professional Growth, Personal Development, and Story Sharing

We suggest that institutions establish intentional, ongoing mentoring initiatives that center on community building and connect undergraduate students with dedicated faculty and graduate mentors. These programs should also emphasize sharing personal narratives to foster a sense of community and empower students through intergenerational knowledge transfer. Shared experiences and storytelling were paramount to LEADD's effectiveness. Additionally, workshops tailored to mastering the Ph.D. application process and to tackling challenges such as institutional barriers will equip Scholars with the confidence they need to navigate their academic journeys.

Create and/or Promote Community College Pathways to the Professoriate

Institutions must actively welcome and support community college students by providing a clear pathway to academic careers. Outreach programs should familiarize these students with the demands and expectations of higher education and actively promote becoming a professor as an option.

Select Highly Qualified Mentors Who Value Mentoring

To foster truly impactful mentoring relationships, it is imperative to select dedicated, accomplished mentor professors who are genuinely willing to "give back" and value the opportunity to mentor.

Bridge Research Aspirations with Community Impact

We suggest that institutions expose Scholars to opportunities to engage in outreach and community-oriented research, fostering a sense of purpose and commitment to effecting meaningful change through public scholarship. Connecting academic aspirations with real-world impact strengthens their dedication to both personal and community growth, as seen in the stories of these LEADD Scholars.

Nurture Scholarly Confidence and Peer Support

Institutions should create opportunities for peers to share in a supportive environment and encourage communication during and outside of sessions. As part of LEADD, each session began with an icebreaker that invited Scholars to share, and workshops focused on professional development.

Affirm Identity and Values

Participants in the LEADD program highlighted how shared values, identity, and community were essential in fostering a sense of belonging. By emphasizing these elements, we can equip individuals to navigate challenges related to representation in higher education and facilitate personal growth through shared experiences and storytelling. We must harness these insights to create impactful programs to uplift and support students.

CONCLUSION

By prioritizing these recommendations, institutions can create a robust framework that not only supports Latina Scholars but also enriches the academic landscape as a whole. Now is the time to harness our collective strength and commitment to turn challenges into opportunities, paving the way for future Latina Scholars.

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BIO

BIANCA NEAL

Bianca Neal is a transformative leader, scholar-practitioner committed to equipping, encouraging, and empowering the next generation of leaders. Her expertise, demonstrated by an Ed.D. in Leadership and Higher Education specializing in Organizational Leadership and Change, is further recognized by a Presidential Award for her significant contributions to leadership, Scholarship, and service. Through her work as a Visiting Scholar with the Proctor Institute at Rutgers University, she co-founded and curated a program that has delivered 27 workshops, supporting and mentoring undergraduate students in pursuing academic careers and furthering their research interests. Her work not only illuminates pathways but actively reshapes the scholarly landscape. Neal's leadership extends beyond academia. Selected as one of 30 High Impact Leaders for the 5-Time NBA Championship Spurs' Community Leadership Institute, she is a key partner in a Central Texas regional initiative, working alongside government, corporate, and community leaders to address eight core issues: workforce development, food disparity, health equity, foster, kinship and adoption support, mental health, relational connections, and community safety. Leveraging her research in social entrepreneurship and changemakers, she serves as the Executive Director of the SaulPaul Foundation, a launchpad for young people and a platform for community members to become community leaders. She has led transformative nationwide initiatives.

GISSELLE CRIOLLO

Gisselle Criollo is the Associate Director for Programs and Communication for the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute for Leadership, Equity, and Justice and the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions. In her role, she leads the coordination of all in-person and virtual programming. She graduated from Rutgers Business School in 2022 with a major in Marketing and a minor in Graphic Design. She is Ecuadorian American and a native to central New Jersey. In her free time, she attends pottery classes and loves to oil paint.

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Orchids in Seattle, 2026

Oil

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Gisselle Criollo

