

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Transcending Borders and Enacting “Servingness:” A Love Letter for Border-HSIs Transformation

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Querida Higher Education,

Every day, for decades, we woke up earlier than the sun. We took the road from our beautiful brick-made houses in Mexicali and Tijuana with *café en mano* (coffee on hand) and our passports, ready to cross the international port of entry alongside our *Transfronterizx* (Transborder) siblings. Every day, we claimed our U.S. citizenship while honoring the *sudor y sangre* (sweat and blood) of our ancestors.

Every day, for decades, we were questioned, harassed, threatened, invalidated, and treated as second-class citizens, even though we were just kids, teenagers, students trying to make our parents proud, trying to learn, to receive a degree, to see education as a space of liberation.

Every day, for decades, we learned. We learned not just in the school itself, but in the streets. We learned how to speak Spanglish, how to change currency in our minds, how to navigate the U.S.-México borderlands, how to defend ourselves from racist immigration officers, how to speak English to those “in power,” and importantly, how to also speak Spanish amongst each other, to be in and feel community.

We Are Transfronterizx Scholar-Activists

I, Carlos, am the son of Verónica and Carlos. I became a Transfronterizo at an early age as I crossed to the U.S. from México to access basic human rights, such as medical services and education. Upon entering college, I spent hours commuting from the port of entry to the college, where I ultimately began to engage in activism as a student leader. In my senior year, I became president of the student association and began questioning how the institution was serving our Transfronterizx student community—a very prominent population of students, including me. As I advocated, I found Vanessa’s support, and together we launched a program in service of our Transfronterizx community: the Building Bridges Graduation.

I, Vanessa, am Transfronteriza from the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands, and the daughter of working-class immigrant parents from México and Perú, Alicia and Carlos Falcón. I was born in Los Angeles, CA, my family moved to the borderlands due to poverty, and I grew up crossing the San Ysidro Port daily. Despite efforts to improve our situation, we faced homelessness in the U.S. Our daily routine involved long commutes for work and school in San Diego. This experience shaped my identity as a scholar-activist dedicated to the social justice of my community. Today, I live between both nations, with personal ties, professional development, and civic leadership in both, supporting Transfronterizx students and families. In 2022, I began efforts to implement the Building Bridges Graduation in higher education at the Imperial Valley–Mexicali border region. This is when I met Carlos; we joined efforts to launch this initiative, and since then we have continued advocacy work for the social justice of our community at the Imperial Valley–Mexicali border region.

Collectively, we are Carlos and Vannessa. We are proudly and unapologetically Transfronterizxs. For years, we were told that our identities did not exist, that we should remain silent about our transborder homes, and that border-crossing students were not valuable in the classrooms. We write to you desperately and with grudges—but with *hope y amor amargo* (sour love). We write to you holding dearly the *deseos* (wishes) and aspirations of our parents, our ancestors, and our future Transfronterizx students with a purpose: let us guide you, let us transform you.

Enacting a B-HSIS Servingness

In an ideal world, we can—and are—transforming you and helping you to transcend borders. Our praxis, grounded on “servingness” (Garcia, 2016; 2019; 2023), is helping you find, accept, and embrace your identity as a Border-Hispanic Serving Institution (Border-HSI). In this process of discovering your organizational identity, you are engaging in a pathway of servingness. Enacting a Border-HSI servingness means fostering the success of borderlander and Transfronterizx communities at your various institutions with proximity to the U.S.-México border (Villareal, 2022). Specifically, you serve Transfronterizx students with love, compassion, and care as they pursue their higher education.

Let Us Guide You, B-HSIS

Let us guide you through this complex pathway of finding and enacting your Border-HSI identity. We, as scholar-activists within your institutions, have already started such transformation, but it is time for you to let us lead and support (Cisneros et al., 2025). We recently organized, via grassroots leadership, the first ever transborder graduation in your history. For years, graduating Transfronterizx students in higher education were unable to attend their graduation ceremony accompanied by family members who had been deported, separated from them, or were unable to cross the U.S.-México border (Falcón Orta et al., [In press]). We and our grassroots leaders at the institution helped you amend this historical disservice, working hard because, sadly, there were no support systems for Transfronterizx students. Slowly but surely, we are transforming you. But this transformation has to be proactive, and it requires more than your disposition. Let us share how you can support all of us, scholar-activists at Border HSIs.

Over the past decade, we have collectively fought for the social justice of our community through various student-led grassroots initiatives dedicated to supporting Transfronterizx students along the California–Baja California borderlands. We are not alone in this fight; our community stands alongside us, sharing this ongoing struggle. As you work toward serving our community at postsecondary and higher education institutions at the borderlands, we urge you to make space for our community to lead and actively participate in the development of Transfronterizx student-serving initiatives. We ask for your cultural humility to follow our leadership in these transformative efforts within your Border-HSIs. We also call on you to create funding opportunities for the initiatives we are already leading, and to establish pathways that ensure their long-term sustainability. These efforts are essential for the continued success and future of our community. Additionally, we ask that you embed our community’s future into your university’s mission, vision, and strategic educational plans, translating these statements into tangible and accessible actions. We urge you to center our Transfronterizx identity in your Border-HSI institutional policies, recognizing and affirming the existence and humanity of our community and our families.

As a second period of the Trump administration commences, we must acknowledge the complexities this brings to our work for Transfronterizx students at Border-HSIs. As we know from the first Trump administration, Transfronterizx students will experience repercussions including geographical trauma, militarization of border communities, and acts and questions probing their citizenship (Falcón Orta, et al., [In press]; Fitch, 2024). As you

continue this journey of owning a Transfronterizx identity, you must rely on the institutional knowledge held by agents of change—educators, students, families—at Border-HSIs, including their connections across the border. Through our diverse perspectives on immigration and border navigation, we can transform Border-HSIs to better serve our students at both academic and sociopolitical levels. Our connectivity and association with our Mexican counterparts is a way to bridge the gap of the ivory tower with our Transfronterizx communities and create bridges for the holistic service of Transfronterizx students. To be transformed as a Border-HSI, you must embrace a praxis that honors the Hispanic-Serving institutional and organizational designation, and that proudly showcases the richness of a border culture and our Transfronterizx capital.

Imagining, Refusing, and Moving Forward

As we conclude, we take space to imagine and transcend the political darkness that so deeply hurts our immigration-impacted communities at the borderlands—namely, our Transfronterizx students and their families. With our Transfronterizx imagination, we refuse this darkness and turmoil. Refusing as well the erasure of our immigration histories, we instead own them and embrace them by transforming you to better serve our Transfronterizx community—holistically, heartfully, and humanistically. This requires us to demand your authentic servingness and the defense of your more vulnerable communities.

Now, more than ever, the ethics of your values and principles are being put to the test. We ask you to walk the talk of valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion, which you so often reference in your mission statements, by working towards social justice for our immigration-impacted community. Dedicate your work to the inclusion, safety, and validation of your Transfronterizx students. It is during these difficult moments that your values are truly tested to ensure Transfronterizx students' access to their human right of an education.

We ask you to defend your identity, mission, and service amid these times of uncertainty and of threat to Latinx and Transfronterizx communities at the borderlands. By defending your identity as a Border-HSI, you express solidarity and support to your agents of change, who transform you on a daily basis for the servingness of Latinx and Transfronterizx students. Our collective transformation is just getting started, and we ask you to join us!

*Let us transform you,
Carlos and Vanessa*

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About the author

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