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## Rethinking Internationalization in STEM: Decolonial Perspectives from U.S. Broadening Participation Initiatives

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### ABSTRACT

*Internationalization in higher education is often framed as universally beneficial, yet scholars increasingly highlight its entanglement with colonial legacies and structural inequities. This study examines how equity-driven internationalization is enacted within U.S. STEM broadening participation programs led by two foreign-born women serving as principal investigators of National Science Foundation-funded initiatives. Guided by Critical Narrative Inquiry, the study draws on in-depth interviews to explore how their leadership practices challenge deficit-oriented perspectives and promote inclusive pathways for historically underrepresented students in STEM. Findings reveal that relational leadership, community accountability, and epistemic pluralism shape mentoring and program design, aligning with decolonial perspectives on internationalization. The study demonstrates how immigrant scholars' lived experiences inform more equitable approaches to global engagement and STEM inclusion within U.S. higher education institutions.*

**Keywords:** Decolonial Internationalization; STEM Broadening Participation; STEM Educational Research; Strengths-based Leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

Equity-driven internationalization offers a distinct yet underexplored opportunity to increase the inclusion and retention of students from diverse backgrounds within U.S. higher education, particularly in STEM fields. Historically, federal agencies, including National Science Foundation, have supported initiatives aimed at broadening participation in STEM (Davis et al., 2024; DeAro et al., 2019). However recent shifts in federal funding priorities necessitate novel and more contextually grounded approaches to STEM inclusion. Central to this Critical Narrative Inquiry is the recognition that the two women at the center of this study, foreign-born principal investigators (PIs) of NSF-funded STEM broadening participation programs in the U.S. are themselves the embodiment of internationalization. Their immigrant trajectories, former experiences as international students, and intersectional identities provide a global lens and an experiential foundation for enacting decolonial forms of leadership within U.S. STEM higher education. This inquiry explores how these PIs draw on relational, strengths-based mentoring practices to create inclusive pathways for URM students in STEM. Accordingly, the guiding question asks: How do the PI's leadership practices align with decolonial approaches to increase inclusion in STEM? In this study, underrepresented minoritized (URM) persons include students who have been historically excluded in STEM on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, dis/ability status, or first-generation college status.

This work unfolds against a rapidly shifting landscape. For years, the National Science Foundation (NSF) Broader Impacts criterion, established under the America COMPETES Act, and reinforced by the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, provided explicit mandate to improve the recruitment, retention, and advancement of historically underrepresented groups in STEM (Etting, 2025). However, the policy landscape shifted in April 2025 when NSF Director announced a new set of cautioning against programs that prefer some groups at the expense of others or that directly/indirectly exclude individuals or groups priorities (Updates on NSF Priorities, 2025). The policy change was accompanied by sweeping programmatic actions, including the termination of over 1,000 active grants deemed not in alignment with current NSF priorities. Projects explicitly centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were among those most affected.

Comparative and international higher education scholars have already demonstrated that internationalization often framed as neutral or universally beneficial, can reproduce Global North dominance, privilege Eurocentric epistemologies, and marginalize alternative ways of knowing (Khalid & Ting, 2025; Mwangi et al., 2018; Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Mendoza et al., 2025; Stein, 2017). Through policies and practices that prioritize global rankings, prestige, and mobility, internationalization often sustains racialized hierarchies and commodifies the participation of URM persons within STEM (Mendoza et al., 2025). Decolonial scholars, examining how contemporary institutions are shaped by colonial power relations, argue that such practices reflect the persistence of coloniality, an ongoing logic of domination underlying modern imperial powers (Gross, 2015; Mignolo, 2018; Shahjahan, 2025). The concept of Whiteness as Futurity helps illuminate how dominant models of internationalization sustain exclusionary futures by naturalizing whiteness as the horizon of institutional aspiration (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the narratives of these two foreign-born women leaders in STEM academia offer an underexamined but deeply consequential perspective. Their lived experiences as international students, their movement across borders, and their ongoing

negotiation of identity within U.S. institutions position them to practice a form of equity-driven internationalization that challenges deficit framings and advance inclusive pathways for URM students in STEM (Gyamerah, 2025; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This research co-constructs counterstories that highlight how these leaders embody decolonial practices by validating plural epistemologies, emphasizing relational accountability, and enacting equity within institutions that otherwise privilege exclusionary logics (Clandinin, 2022; Mendoza et al., 2025; Shahjahan, 2025; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

This article makes three contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence of how decolonial internationalization can be enacted in practice through relational, strengths-based leadership. Second, it extends theoretical debates on Whiteness as Futurity and coloniality by showing how immigrant women leaders disrupt exclusionary structures in STEM. Third, it demonstrates how equity-driven internationalization can persist under restrictive policy conditions, offering insights for designing globally informed STEM initiatives that center plural epistemologies, community accountability, and durable pathways for underrepresented students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Internationalization and Coloniality**

Internationalization is often framed as a universally positive strategy for global engagement in higher education (De Wit, 2019; Mendoza et al., 2025; Stein, 2017). Widely cited definitions emphasize integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension to enhance quality and relevance. Yet this framing obscures how internationalization is deeply entangled with colonial legacies, neoliberal imperatives, and racialized hierarchies (Mendoza et al., 2025). The dominant model privileges Global North academic structures, privileges Eurocentric epistemologies, and marginalizes alternative systems of knowledge. Policies and practices centered on global rankings, prestige and mobility often reproduce systemic inequities by commodifying the participation of URM persons in STEM higher education.

Mendoza et al. (2025) argue for an equitable reorientation of internationalization that centers anticolonial critique and critical border thinking (Shahjahan, 2016). Such a framework challenges methodological nationalism, recognizes the geopolitical asymmetries shaping higher education, and prioritizes plural epistemologies. Plural epistemologies refer to the coexistence and recognition of multiple, culturally grounded ways of knowing, including indigenous, local, experiential, and community-driven knowledge systems rather than privileging a single Eurocentric or universalized framework. Methodological nationalism is the tendency to naturalize the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis in higher education research, thereby obscuring transnational processes, colonial histories, and power relations that shape institutions and actors (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). However, U.S. based STEM internationalization agendas frequently obscure these dynamics, favoring superficial forms of global engagement that align with neoliberal logics of competitiveness while displacing or co-opting transformative possibilities (Mendoza et al., 2025).

### ***Whiteness as Futurity***

The concept of Whiteness as Futurity provides a powerful lens for interrogating internationalization (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). Whiteness structures higher

education's visions of the future by naturalizing white, Eurocentric norms as the horizon of aspiration. In this framework, institutional practices, ranging from global rankings to faculty recruitment to curricular design, reproduce whiteness as the standard against which all else is measured (Mendoza et al., 2025). The effect is not merely the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups in the present but the continuous reproduction of exclusionary futures in which whiteness remains the normative center.

This framing helps explain how internationalization sustains exclusion even under the guise of diversity and inclusion. Efforts to globalize often equate to expanding the reach of Euro-American models rather than creating space for plural epistemologies (Mwangi & Yao, 2021). URM students and scholars may be included, but often in ways that reinforce rather than disrupt white futurity through tokenization, assimilation to dominant epistemic norms, or commodification as symbols of institutional diversity. Such logics of aspiration reflect broader systems of antiblackness and coloniality that structure global higher education (Edwards & Shahjahan, 2024).

### **Decoloniality and Relational Frameworks**

Decoloniality offers a counter-framework to coloniality and whiteness (Mendoza et al., 2025; Mignolo, 2018; Shahjahan, 2025). Decoloniality is an epistemic, political, and pedagogical project that seeks to unpack the modern civilizational worldview and recognize nonmodern systems of knowledge as legitimate (Grosfoguel, 2008; W. Mignolo, 2011). Decolonial approaches center pluralism, relationality, and community accountability, rather than universalizing Eurocentric categories of thought. Integrating local ecological knowledge alongside Western environmental science in STEM programs exemplifies pluralism. An example of community accountability is evident in practices of co-developing curricula or research agenda with local communities like STEM outreach programs around community-identified needs rather than present institutional goals.

Indigenous and decolonial frameworks emphasize relationality, the idea that knowledge and leadership are fundamentally relational, arising from and accountable to community rather than isolated individuals (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; Elliott-Groves et al., 2020; Kovach, 2021; Tuhiwai, 2012). Relational leadership involves empathy, reciprocity, and responsibility to uplift others, rather than pursuing self-interest alone. Alongside this comes community accountability, which ensures that leaders are answerable to the communities they serve and that their work reflects mutual benefit and respect.

These perspectives resonate with Mendoza et al.'s (2025) call for equity-oriented internationalization. They highlight the need for practices such as participatory action research with communities as equals, the recognition of multilingual and Indigenous knowledge systems, and the creation of partnerships that move beyond extractive, one-way knowledge transfers. In this sense, decoloniality offers not only critique but also a roadmap for transforming internationalization into a project of justice, equity, and pluralism.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed Critical Narrative Inquiry (CNI) as the research design. Narrative inquiry provides a framework for examining how individuals make meaning of their experiences through stories, situating those stories within social and institutional contexts (Clandinin, 2022; Clandinin & Caine, 2013). The "critical" dimension of CNI draws from critical race methodology, which emphasizes the centrality of race, gender, and

power in shaping lived experience, and validates counterstories as legitimate forms of knowledge production (Dabiri, 2025; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CNI was particularly appropriate for this study because the purpose was to illuminate how two foreign-born women PIs of NSF BP programs enact strengths-based, relational leadership that supports URM students in STEM. As a decolonial-aligned methodology, CNI moves beyond deficit framings by centering participants' experiential knowledge as assets and connecting personal narratives to broader structures of power.

Following Clandinin's (2022) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, this study attended to temporality, or how experiences are shaped by past, present, and future contexts; sociability, or the interplay between personal meaning and social interactions; and place, or the specific institutional and community settings where stories unfold. These dimensions, temporality, sociability, and place, trace how each PI's immigrant trajectory, professional role, and relational practices intersect with institutional structures and broader discourses of internationalization.

### ***Participants and Recruitment***

The participants were two foreign-born women who serve as PIs of NSF-funded STEM BP programs at predominantly white institutions in the U.S. Both were recruited through purposive sampling based on their leadership roles as URM women, which positioned them uniquely to contribute to this study's focus on equity-driven internationalization. As the sole researcher, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to recruitment (IRB Project Number 2105626). Participants were invited through email and provided with detailed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections. Each participant selected their own pseudonyms to ensure anonymity while preserving agency in self-representation (Dabiri, 2025a; Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Identifying details, including institutional names and specific program titles, were generalized or omitted to protect confidentiality.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection consisted of two in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews with each participant. The first interview elicited life histories and professional trajectories, focusing on educational background, pathways into STEM leadership, motivations for engaging in BP work, and experiences with institutional structures. The second interview served to clarify and expand emerging storylines, providing space for participants to reflect on themes identified in the initial narratives.

Interviews were conducted via videoconference platform Zoom, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Supplementary materials, such as program documents and participant reflections, were also reviewed when available, though primary data source was the participants' oral narratives. Throughout the process, I employed a relational stance by listening actively, affirming participants' expertise, and creating conversational space for stories to unfold in their own terms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Saldaña, 2013). This was essential to building trust and enabling the emergence of counterstories that resist dominant deficit narratives about URM students and women leaders.

## ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis followed a restorying approach (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Transcripts were reorganized into chronological narratives that foregrounded key events, turning points, and strategies across time. This process produced interim research texts, which captured each participant's story as a coherent whole while remaining open to revision. Consistent with CNI, I also maintained analytic memos throughout the research process. These memos served as spaces to record initial interpretations, emerging themes, and reflexive insights about how my own positionality as a foreign-born academic shaped my reading of the data. The interim texts were shared with participants for member checking, enabling them to review, clarify, and refine the narratives. This co-construction process ensured that the counterstories authentically reflected the participants' voices and perspectives.

The final stage involved constructing counterstories that highlighted the participants' strengths-based, relational approaches to mentoring URM students in STEM. A counterstory is a narrative that challenges dominant or taken-for-granted accounts by foregrounding the lived experiences, knowledges, and perspectives of URM persons or groups. These counterstories were analyzed both individually and comparatively to identify cross-cutting themes related to relational leadership, epistemic pluralism, and resistance to exclusionary logics of internationalization.

## **Reflexivity and Positionality**

Throughout the research process, I acknowledge that my positionality shaped this study. I identify as a foreign-born academic who was working within a predominantly white U.S. institution, an identity that confers both insider and outsider perspectives. This outsider-within position (Kezar, 2010) informed my sensitivity to how immigrant identities intersect with structural inequities in STEM higher education.

Reflexivity was integral to research design (Gavidia & Adu, 2022). I documented my assumptions, reactions, and evolving interpretations in analytic memos and returned repeatedly to the participants' words to guard against imposing my own meanings. I tried to minimize interpretive distortion and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings by foregrounding the participants' voices and engaging them in narrative co-construction. Trustworthiness was further supported through analytic triangulation across interviews and memos and use of thick description to convey context-rich accounts of participants' experiences.

## **RESULTS**

Exploring the narratives of Kalanchoe and Tigueraje (pseudonyms), the research participants illustrate how strengths-based and relational leadership practices can reframe internationalization in ways that align with decolonial approaches (Mendoza et al., 2025; Shahjahan, 2025). A decolonial lens in higher education calls for epistemic liberation from Eurocentrism, situating those outside the Global North as experts and creating (pluri)versity that embrace epistemic diversity rather than monolithic (uni)versities (Mendoza et al., 2025). It involves recognizing the coloniality of power established over 500 years of European dominance and actively contesting how it shapes today's institutions (Mignolo, 2011; Shahjahan, 2025). Epistemic delinking, navigating institutional power, relationality, knowledge pluralism, and community accountability are among the key

themes that emerged out of the data analysis through a decolonial lens. Mendoza et al. (2025) argue that a truly decolonial approach entails breaking with the Eurocentric hegemony in academia, valuing multiple ways of knowing, and partnering with communities on an equal footing. In this section, I explore each theme in turn, comparing Kalanchoe's and Tigueraje's experiences through this critical framework.

### **Epistemic Delinking and Plural Knowledge**

Epistemic delinking means breaking away from dominant Western knowledge practices and mindsets (Mbah et al., 2024; Meghji, 2023; Mendoza et al., 2025; Shahjahan, 2025). That liberation requires turning away from dominant Western knowledge and engaging with other epistemologies. In practice, this involves embracing knowledge pluralism and recognizing the legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems, especially those outside the traditional Euro-American academy (Shahjahan, 2025). Mendoza et al. (2025) advocate for an academic space open to epistemic diversity, where scholars from the Global South and other marginalized contexts contribute as equal knowledge holders.

Kalanchoe's counterstory reflects subtle forms of epistemic delinking. Coming from a small island nation with limited formal education infrastructure, she developed a scientific identity through self-learning and a non-U.S. cultural lens. This background helps her empathize with URM persons in ways many of her U.S.-born colleagues cannot. In her leadership, Kalanchoe values more than just the canonical metrics of success; she celebrates intangibles like students gaining confidence or finding their path, even if they leave STEM. For instance, she notes that if a student realizes research "is not for me" but improves their life or finds a better-suited passion, that is still a success in her eyes which subtly challenges the Western institutional focus on narrow outcomes (e.g., retaining students strictly in STEM pipelines).

In decolonial terms, Kalanchoe is broadening what counts as valid knowledge and success, incorporating students' personal growth and well-being as measures of achievement alongside traditional benchmarks. Moreover, she stresses the importance of "soft skills" (communication, vision, networking) in her BP program, noting that technical knowledge alone is not enough. She is pluralizing the knowledge and competencies valued in STEM training by elevating these often undervalued skills. While Kalanchoe operates within conventional science, she "meets people where they are" and encourages students to bring their whole selves, implicitly validating knowledge drawn from their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. This inclusive approach resonates with decolonial calls to recenter subjugated knowledges and dismantle the myth that only Western modes of thinking produce good science (Mignolo, 2011). At the same time, Kalanchoe's narrative only partially delinks from dominant epistemology. She maintains that "scientific excellence" and high standards are paramount and insists that URM students be held to the same rigorous expectations as others.

Tigueraje's journey shows a clear evolution toward epistemic delinking. Early in her career, she internalized a meritocratic, "color-blind" mindset; she disclosed, "I was one of those people... 'we're all the same, I don't want any advantages because I'm a woman'." This reflected a desire to assimilate and be judged only by dominant standards, not by identity. However, a turning point during her PhD changed her outlook. Balancing a technical competition with caring for a sick child made her realize that structural inequities (like motherhood penalties and male-centric norms) were preventing a truly equal playing field. She recalls feeling it was "so unfair" that all those asking questions during the

contest's critical window were men without her same constraints. After still winning the competition thanks in part to her nontraditional knowledge from industry experience, Tigueraje "embraced" her identity facets (Hispanic, immigrant, mother, first-gen) as sources of pride and motivation. She describes it as a "fire in me... I want to be part of the change," actively working to increase representation in her field. This awakening is a form of epistemic delinking: she rejected the notion that success requires erasing or "hiding" one's non-dominant identities and instead started leveraging her unique experiential knowledge. For example, Tigueraje attributes her victory in that case competition to the practical wisdom she gained in industry, which allowed her to present a more mature, applied solution than a typical PhD student. She challenged the academic hierarchy that might dismiss non-academic experience as less scholarly. This aligns with decolonial ideas of legitimizing knowledge from beyond the academy's traditional confines.

Tigueraje also draws on cultural epistemology: notably, she chose "Tigueraje" as her pseudonym precisely to invoke a concept from her home culture, meaning cunning ingenuity or "grit... you find a way to make it work." She explains growing up with resource shortages (power outages forcing her to study by oil lamp) taught her creative resilience. In her words, she gained the ability to "make things work where there's nothing," much like the 1980s TV character MacGyver. She symbolically centers a non-Western knowledge of survival and innovation that stems from her lived reality by foregrounding Tigueraje as her identity. This is a powerful example of epistemic delinking: she frames her leadership approach around a local knowledge construct (a slang from her region) rather than a Eurocentric leadership theory. Indeed, decolonial scholars emphasize bringing "others' worldviews into the fabric of our society" as a means to disrupt Global North hegemony. Tigueraje does exactly that by valorizing a Latin American notion of street smarts within academia. Rather than accepting institutional inertia, she creates opportunities from scratch: "I created [a mentoring program]! I'm not gonna wait." Her resourcefulness and refusal to be limited by the established system echo the decolonial ethos of forging alternative paths. Taken together, Kalanchoe practiced a quieter, integrative form of epistemic delinking that broadened definitions of knowledge and success within existing structure, whereas Tigueraje enacted a more explicit and identity-affirming break from Eurocentric norms by centering culturally rooted ways of knowing and using them to reimagine what counts as expertise in STEM.

### **Navigating and Challenging Institutional Power**

Decolonial approaches demand scrutiny of institutional power structures and the colonial, neoliberal, and imperial arcs that shape them (Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Mendoza et al., 2025). In the context of internationalized higher education, Mendoza et al. (2025) urge us to "acknowledge current structures of power put in place 500 years ago" and contest how they perpetuate inequalities. For individuals, this often means navigating institutions from within while pushing for change, close to what Meyerson (2008) described as a tempered radical framework (working inside the system but not being of it). The Critical Narrative Inquiry findings explicitly note these women employ Tempered Critical Leadership (TCL), balancing their roles as insiders with collective action to drive change (Dabiri, 2025b). We examine how each PI navigates academic and organizational power dynamics and to what extent their actions align with decolonial ideas of transforming those dynamics.

Kalanchoe's narrative shows a keen awareness of power, yet as a largely integrative strategy. She mentions that in her personal career, being a Black woman did not overtly impede her advancement; she shared, "I got tenure...did everything I was supposed to" with no special problems. She credits this in part to her personality: "I tend to be outspoken...I say what I'm thinking, respectfully, and I think people appreciate that," which helped her build strong collegial relationships and find advocates. This hints at a strategy of speaking truth to power in a palatable way, which allowed her to navigate academia's hierarchies without being ostracized. It aligns with TCL in that she did not remain silent about issues but voiced them "respectfully" to maintain her standing and create change from within (Dabiri, 2025b).

Kalanchoe leveraged institutional structures to amplify her influence. For example, she took on leadership roles beyond the designated "diversity" track: "I chaired the Science Policy Committee [of a major scientific society] ...meeting with Congressional offices," which led to a seat on the society's board of directors. She made herself visible as a Black female leader in science by occupying a high-profile, mainstream role (science policy) rather than a sidelined diversity committee. She notes that younger URM scientists "gravitated towards me because they were excited to see somebody like them in [such] a position," and she hopes she set an example for them. The act of inserting marginalized bodies into elite spaces to challenge the norm of white/male leadership reflects a decolonial tactic of representation and disruption. It also echoes Mendoza et al.'s (2025) point that current "world-class university" metrics enable "white futurity" by concentrating resources and talent in already advantaged (often Western) institutions.

When faced with such barriers, Kalanchoe adapts her navigation strategy. She notes that being at a private institution currently gives her more freedom to continue equity work (since the bans on DEI language don't apply to her private academic institution). In a decolonial sense, she is exploiting cracks in the system, finding or creating environments where she can still contest inequity. Her establishment of a separate NSF-supported internship program for differently-abled high schoolers in her lab (outside the "big programs") is another example. She essentially built an inclusive initiative on her own terms, funded by an external grant, thereby bypassing institutional inertia. This mirrors how colonized people often had to create parallel structures to serve their communities. It's a small-scale enactment of autonomy within the larger power structure.

As a junior scholar (early-career faculty), Tigueraje's narrative is more uphill in navigating power, and she is candid about the challenges. In her first faculty position, she encountered subtle resistance from male students: they sent her emails with a "lack of respect" subtext that she believes to be motivated by her identities. After sharing these emails with colleagues, she confirmed it wasn't "just her"; it was a form of collective sense-making and a way to seek support. This reflects how she navigates power by validating her perceptions through community (she does not simply accept the disrespect as a personal failing; she identifies it as a gender/ethnicity power issue). Tigueraje "dealt with it" professionally in the moment, but this experience likely motivated her to change the culture. Indeed, she explicitly states that certain needs of URM groups, "I want to start making a difference." We see her stepping into advocacy: she notes that she is now "recognized for working proactively to increase representation in my field."

In practical terms, Tigueraje secured an NSF BP grant, which she describes as "legitimizing" the unpaid work she had already been doing. The grant serves as a "stamp of approval...assigning money value" to her diversity efforts, which in turn strengthens her

leverage within the university (her passion now has external validation and funding). This reflects navigational knowledge of institutional power: she sought resources from the broader system (NSF) to support her cause, rather than waiting for her department to value that work fully. Tigueraje notes that, while the grant might not make or break her tenure case, it helps demonstrate impact and justifies the significant time she devotes to mentoring and outreach. In other words, she is translating her decolonial-aligned labor (diversity mentoring, pipeline building) into the language of the institution (grants and measurable impact) to gain institutional buy-in.

Tigueraje also pushes on policy-level barriers. One systemic inequity she highlights is how universities handle the tenure clock for women with children. She criticizes that stopping the clock for a year still effectively expects women to produce as if they had the extra year: “It’s not a true stop... the expectation is that you produce [research] for that extra year.” This practice, she argues, is “not right” and makes her “very mad.” Notably, she says it doesn’t even affect her directly at the moment, which shows she is advocating on principle for women colleagues and future mothers, a form of community-oriented resistance. Tigueraje enacts what Mendoza et al. (2025) describe as “engaging in critical work questioning...the Eurocentric hegemony” of academia. Traditional tenure norms were built around meritocracy and archetypes, challenging them is part of decolonizing institutional culture to be more inclusive of diverse life experiences. Tigueraje’s willingness to call out these inequities, even pre-tenure, demonstrates courageous navigation demonstrating that she is using her voice and the credibility her grant has given her to press for structural change.

In daily institutional life, Tigueraje practices a relational power strategy. She mentions serving on committees and also starting a new program for high school outreach at her institution. By doing so, she builds networks and demonstrates leadership beyond her research lab. She also makes a point of recruiting students from other (more female) disciplines into her analytics courses and then “bring them to my side” (into STEM). This indicates an approach of working within existing curricular structures to shift student demographics. Every student she convinces to pursue a STEM master’s or PhD (especially women and first-gens) is a small victory against the institutional pattern of underrepresentation. Over time, these “small anticolonial actions” accumulate to alter the composition and culture of the field, aligning with decolonial aims. In sum, while Kalanchoe navigated institutional power through integrative, system-savvy strategies that leveraged existing structures to advance equity, Tigueraje confirmed power more disruptively by challenging inequitable norms, mobilizing external legitimacy, and converting her advocacy into structural and cultural change.

### **Relationality and Community Accountability**

Decolonial and Indigenous frameworks center relationality: knowledge and leadership arise in, through, and for relationships, with accountability to the human and more-than-human community rather than the isolated individual (Elliott-Groves et al., 2020). Relational leadership emphasizes empathy, reciprocity, and collective responsibility, treating influence as co-constructed in ongoing interactions rather than as a form of positional authority. Community accountability anchors practice in ethical partnership and co-creation (e.g., participatory and integrated knowledge translation that works with communities as equal partners and measures success by mutual benefit). I

therefore examine how each PI's narrative enacts relational values and accountability to a broader community.

Fittingly, Kalanchoe chose a plant known as “mother of thousands” as her pseudonym, an apt metaphor for her relational leadership style. Throughout her interview, she speaks in terms of nurturing and multiplying the success of others. She expresses immense pride in her students' growth: “Every year... when the students give their presentations, I feel very, very proud to see how they've grown.” Her proudest achievement was mentoring the first Black differently-abled woman in her field to a PhD, watching that student go on to a scientist position in industry. Kalanchoe emphasizes “she did the work...she earned her degree,” underscoring that her student's accomplishment is owned by the student, not as a favor. This highlights an essential relational ethic: as a mentor, Kalanchoe supported and challenged her mentee but ultimately centers the mentee's agency and dignity (no paternalism). Such an approach aligns with decolonial mentoring, which would reject a colonial “savior” stance and instead “work with communities as equals.” Indeed, Kalanchoe mentions she made the PhD program fit her student (not the other way around), indicating an adaptability to individual needs that comes from genuine care.

Kalanchoe's empathy stems from shared experiences. She notes, “I can understand what first-generation students are going through, because I fit so many of the URM boxes.” Having been a low-income, first-gen, Black immigrant student herself, she relates on multiple levels. This relational understanding informs how she “meets people where they are” and refrains from judging based on preconceived notions. Instead, she actively listens and learns each student's context. For example, she recounts how she gives “tough love” feedback; she shared, “I'll tell you ‘that was a horrible talk, go practice!’...from a place of caring and belief they can do better.” Her students recognized this as care: one joked when she was graduating, “Who's going to kick our asses now?” They valued that she pushed them because she cared. This illustrates relational accountability as she holds students to high standards not to enforce conformity, but because she feels responsible for their growth and knows their success will empower them (and by extension, their communities). In decolonial terms, Kalanchoe rejects both cold elitism and patronizing leniency; she chooses a relational middle path of challenging with compassion, which honors the student as a whole person.

Beyond individual mentoring, Kalanchoe has cultivated community among peers. She helped form an informal network of Black female scientists in her field, noting, “everybody is having the same experiences...that has been really supportive and helpful for me as a scientist.” This sisterhood provides emotional support and shared strategies for navigating their institutions. Such solidarity is a decolonial act of relational resilience, countering the isolation that coloniality often imposes on minority scholars by collectivizing their struggle. Kalanchoe also disseminates her inclusive practices: after bringing differently-abled students into her lab and “amazing” her institution with what these students could do, she gave workshops on how to accommodate and include such students. She notes with satisfaction that colleagues now come to her for advice, and that, proactively, other support initiatives are put in place for differently-abled students in her department. In essence, Kalanchoe created a community of practice around accessibility, and she is accountable to that community by sharing knowledge and ensuring it spreads beyond herself. This exemplifies community accountability in a sense that her leadership is not about personal accolades but about changing the environment for everyone. She even

expresses that she hopes more majority-group colleagues will join BP efforts so that “everybody shares the work...students get the message that everybody cares and is invested in me.” She does not want URM students to feel that only women or minorities will support them; she envisions a community of allies, which is a decolonial vision of a more relational, less segmented academia.

Tigueraje’s relational orientation shines through in her mentoring and inspiration of students. She actively keeps a “Feel Good Folder” (her term) with positive notes from students and mentees, indicating how much she treasures those relationships and their feedback. She proudly shares stories of mentees she encouraged to pursue graduate degrees. For example, one of her undergraduate research mentees was first-generation and hadn’t considered grad school until Tigueraje intervened; that student “went on to get a PhD in engineering,” a success Tigueraje finds deeply rewarding. In her teaching role at a college with many first-gen students, she says, “80% of my mentees have been women...all have gone on to do masters,” many in STEM fields they initially weren’t in. This highlights Tigueraje’s commitment to opening doors for those following her. She speaks not of her own research achievements here, but of her students’ achievements, a clear indicator that she locates her legacy in the community she cultivates.

Tigueraje is very intentional in affirming identities as part of her mentorship. After her own epiphany about embracing her identity, she models that for others. The excerpt from an article she shared about her mentee demonstrates this: her mentee recounts how Tigueraje systematically vowed, “I’m going to convince you to get your master’s...your PhD,” even when the student doubted herself. Tigueraje “helped build her confidence” until graduate education became not only imaginable but exciting. The student describes finally finding “her niche, her people, and her place” through this journey. Notably, Tigueraje’s influence went beyond academic advising and fostered a sense of belonging (“her people”) and purpose (being of service with social issues important to her). This underscores a decolonial aspect of Tigueraje’s mentorship: it is not just about producing more engineers, but about empowering individuals to connect their education to community service and identity. She instills in students that they deserve to be in these spaces and can use STEM to give back to causes they care about. That relational, socially conscious mentoring reflects accountability to community needs rather than just institutional goals.

Tigueraje also demonstrates community accountability in her career choices. She left a lucrative industry path because “I did not want my time on earth to be spent generating more profit.” Instead, she pursued a PhD with a focus on humanitarian and equitable outcomes, saying she wanted to contribute to a “more fair, equitable” world and reduce disparities. This motivation reveals a relational worldview: her sense of purpose is tied to service rather than individual advancement. It resonates with indigenous and decolonial values of using one’s gifts for the community and being accountable to the broader human family rather than to corporate shareholders or personal wealth. Tigueraje’s ongoing work in extreme events and humanitarian logistics is likely an extension of this ethic (addressing real-world crises that affect communities).

In her role as a faculty member, Tigueraje launched a high school outreach program at her university to expose local students (often from underrepresented groups) to opportunities in STEM. This new program, that was scheduled to launch in the summer of 2025, shows her proactive commitment to community engagement beyond the campus; she is literally widening the circle of those who benefit from her expertise. She notes she had

done outreach during her PhD and “it took a while,” but she got one started in her current job. This persistence in community outreach, even before tenure, underscores how answerable she feels to the younger generation in her cultural/community context. It is a decolonial practice to break the town-gown divide and ensure knowledge flows to and from the community.

Examining Kalanchoe’s and Tigueraje’s counterstories side by side, we find significant alignment with decolonial approaches to internationalization. Both narratives function as counterstories that challenge the dominant tale of STEM leadership (the “master narrative” of a Western, male, authentic scientific ways of knowing). They offer alternative scripts for those who can be STEM leaders and for how leadership can be enacted, which in itself is a decolonial act of storytelling. As the Critical Narrative Inquiry methodology notes, such counterstories illuminate the experiences of URM women leading STEM BP programs and preserve the richness of their perspectives (Dabiri, 2025a). In doing so, they disrupt the colonial silencing of these voices.

Both women’s counterstories delink from the myth of meritocracy and the presumed neutrality of the Global North ontology. They identify how social context and identity affect opportunities; Kalanchoe learns that racism can warp professional recognition (her professor ignoring her correct answer until a white student repeated it), and Tigueraje realizes that gendered roles (like motherhood) and stereotypes kept her from equal footing despite her talent. Their narratives align with decolonial calls to pause and reflect on the assumptions behind our work and see the historicity of concepts like merit. They each incorporate non-Western or non-traditional knowledge (be it Kalanchoe’s emphasis on soft skills and early education, or Tigueraje’s cultural grit and industry acumen) as valued parts of their practice, embodying pluriversal thinking.

Kalanchoe and Tigueraje’s narratives largely align with decolonial approaches to internationalization through their emphasis on pluralizing knowledge, challenging institutional inequities, leading relationally, and being accountable to marginalized communities (Mendoza et al., 2025). Decoloniality implies dismantling the coloniality of power and bringing others’ worldviews into our systems. These two women are actively dismantling barriers and injecting their worldviews and values into the STEM higher education landscape. Together, these practices translate abstract decolonial commitments into concrete, repeatable routines within programs and departments. Viewed through this applied lens, the women’s leadership to broaden the inclusion of URM persons in STEM hinges on three interrelated themes: relational mentorship as a strategy of inclusion, strengths-based approaches that validate students’ assets, and tempered leadership to navigate structural constraints.

### **Relational Mentorship as a Strategy of Inclusion**

Both PIs frame mentorship as a relational practice that produces belonging, not assimilation. Tigueraje stated, “I know what it feels like to enter a room and not see anyone who looks like you. So, the first thing I do is make sure my students know they belong here.” This stance treats students as knowers whose histories and aspirations matter, aligning with decolonial and indigenous commitments to relationality and accountability to community rather than isolated individual achievement (Elliott-Groves et al., 2020; Mendoza et al., 2025). Kalanchoe underscored rapport as the conduit for learning; she shared, “Students come with so much they don’t even know is valuable. I spend time listening, so they know I see them and value what they bring.” Such reciprocity positions

mentoring as co-constructed and ethically accountable, consistent with calls to work with communities as equals in equity-oriented internationalization and with relational leadership that centers trust, respect, and mutual obligation (Mendoza et al., 2025). In contexts where internationalization often reproduces Eurocentric norms and hierarchies, these practices enact a counter-logic that centers belonging through sustained, accountable relationships (Edwards & Shahjahan, 2024; Stein, 2017).

### **Strengths-Based Approaches to Student Development**

Both leaders reject remediation frames and build from students' existing assets (Yosso, 2005). As one puts it: “[My own experience with racial and gender stereotypes] has served me well to be more open-minded and more willing to meet people where they are, instead of presuming that I know about them. This approach resonates with Community Cultural Wealth, which identifies aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistant capitals already present among URM students (Yosso, 2005). Strengths-based design redefines progress as growth anchored in students' knowledge systems and identities, rather than conformity to a single Eurocentric benchmark of readiness. It also broadens what counts as STEM formation by explicitly valuing soft skills and translational competencies alongside technical mastery, aligning with decolonial calls for epistemic pluralism and for internationalization that recognizes multiple ways of knowing and becoming (Mendoza et al., 2025; Stein, 2017). The PIs disrupt deficit narratives and advance equity-driven internationalization in practice, where inclusion is measured not only by retention but by self-authored pathways into STEM and beyond to the workforce.

### **Navigating Institutional Structures through Tempered Leadership**

Both PIs describe strategic accommodation without capitulation (Dabiri, 2025b; Meyerson, 2008). Tigueraje explains how she converts equity work into institutionally legible currency: “after having the grant is like a stamp of approval... it consolidates me as a more of a leadership role and really validates the worth of my contribution... because you're assigning money value to what [I do].” Kalanchoe likewise notes the limits of mandated metrics; she reflected, “It may not be what the funding agency wants,” and insists that “what also people miss is the intangibles... Every so often I get an email from a student... I think these things are really, really important too,” which she treats as consequential evidence of program impact. Their tempered approach pairs translation with principled critique. Tigueraje challenges biased policies: “It's not a true stop of the clock... the expectation is that you produce for that extra year... I just don't think that's right.” Kalanchoe attains influence in core scientific governance rather than siloed “diversity” lanes; she shared, “I chaired the Science Policy Committee... met with Congress... it... put me... on the board of directors,” visibility that drew URM mentees and expanded her change lever. At the interpersonal level, Tigueraje documents gendered disrespect from male students and responds professionally while building coalitions to validate her perception; Kalanchoe cultivates credibility through candor and care: “I tend to be quite outspoken... I say what I am thinking... and I think people appreciate that... I've had some people advocate for me very strongly.” This tempered leadership converts relational, justice-oriented work into forms recognized by institutions to secure resources and protection, while sustaining deeper equity aims.

Both counterstories converge on three enactments of decolonial internationalization: first, relational mentorship that produces belonging through reciprocity and accountability, second, strengths-based development that expands recognized capitals and outcomes beyond Eurocentric metrics, and third, tempered leadership that translates justice work into institutional currencies without relinquishing purpose under Whiteness-as-Futurity constraints. Together, they map a continuum of practice from direct student-facing relationship work to system-facing negotiation. In doing so, they model how these leaders can enact “small anticolonial actions” that reframe internationalization toward epistemic pluralism and community accountability, even within structures that still privilege Eurocentric epistemologies (Mendoza et al., 2025; Stein, 2017).

## **DISCUSSION**

This Critical Narrative Inquiry examined how two foreign-born women PIs of NSF-funded STEM broadening participation programs enact strengths-based, relational leadership that supports URM students in higher education. Their narratives reveal both alignment with and departures from dominant models of internationalization. By situating their practices within the frameworks of Whiteness as Futurity (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021) and decoloniality (Mwangi & Yao, 2021; Mendoza et al., 2025), the findings provide insight into how internationalization can either perpetuate exclusionary logics or open possibilities for more equitable futures.

### **Challenging Whiteness as Futurity**

Internationalization as currently practiced in U.S. higher education often reinforces exclusionary futures by replicating Global North models, privileging Eurocentric epistemologies, and commodifying diversity (Mendoza et al., 2025; Stein, 2017). The participants’ counterstories illustrate how such logics operate at ground level. For instance, institutional expectations regarding productivity and prestige required PIs to translate their equity work into institutionally legible outputs, such as grants and publications. This reflects Whiteness-as-Futurity’s emphasis on sustaining dominance by naturalizing white, Eurocentric norms as the aspirational ideal (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022). Yet, the PIs also enacted small but significant disruptions, for instance, through centering relational mentorship and validating students’ cultural and community knowledge, they expanded what counts as success in STEM.

### **Decolonial Approaches in Practice**

The findings also align with decolonial frameworks, which emphasize epistemic pluralism, relationality, and community accountability (Mignolo, 2011; Shahjahan, 2021). Both PIs emphasized mentoring as a relational practice grounded in empathy, reciprocity, and responsibility to students’ broader communities. Their work resonates with indigenous and decolonial calls to work with communities as equals (Mendoza et al., 2025). It demonstrates how equity-driven internationalization can be enacted even within constraining institutional environments (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021). Importantly, their approaches illustrate that decolonial practice need not be abstract or theoretical. It can emerge in everyday leadership routines: listening to students’ stories, affirming their assets, and creating pathways that reflect community-defined notions of success. These actions constitute what Mendoza et al. (2025) describe as critical border thinking, which seeks to

disrupt methodological nationalism and center marginalized perspectives (Dabiri, 2025a; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013).

### **Navigating Constraints through Tempered Leadership**

The study also underscores the tensions of operating within exclusionary systems (Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Zambrana et al., 2017). The PIs' tempered leadership reflects the dual demands of advancing equity while satisfying institutional metrics. This balancing act reveals both the possibilities and limitations of decolonial practice in the U.S. STEM context. While their relational and strengths-based practices foster inclusion, they remain constrained by broader political shifts, including NSF's 2025 policy changes that prohibit programs explicitly targeting URM groups. Thus, the participants' narratives demonstrate the precariousness of equity-driven internationalization. On one hand, they illustrate the resilience and creativity of leaders who push against structural barriers; on the other, they highlight how quickly such efforts can be undermined by policy realignments rooted in colorblind or assimilationist logics.

### **CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to explore how equity-driven internationalization can be enacted through the leadership practices of two foreign-born women PIs directing NSF-funded STEM broadening participation programs in the U.S. Using Critical Narrative Inquiry, I co-constructed counterstories that traced how these leaders drew upon their immigrant trajectories and professional experiences to create inclusive pathways for URM students in STEM.

The narratives revealed three central themes including relational mentorship that fosters belonging and counters isolation, strengths-based approaches that validate students' cultural and community assets, and tempered leadership that strategically balances institutional compliance with equity commitments. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how decolonial approaches rooted in relationality, epistemic pluralism, and community accountability can be enacted in everyday practices, even within institutions structured by Eurocentric norms.

This research contributes to the field in three important ways. First, it provides empirical evidence of decolonial internationalization in practice, moving beyond critique to illuminate concrete leadership strategies that support URM students in STEM. Second, it extends the framework of Whiteness as Futurity by showing how institutional logics of prestige, productivity, and neutrality manifest in leaders' daily work and how those logics can be disrupted through counterstories. Third, it demonstrates the utility of Critical Narrative Inquiry for documenting the practices of leaders whose approaches challenge deficit-oriented narratives in STEM.

Looking ahead, the findings support a policy-practice-research roadmap: institutions should recognize and resource relational, strengths-based mentoring as scholarly labor by embedding equity work into workload models, promotion and tenure criteria, and leadership development. Funding agencies should safeguard pathways for URM participation within "all-inclusive" frameworks by leveraging durable access points (e.g., geography, institutional type, socioeconomic status) while maintaining disaggregated outcome tracking so historically excluded groups are not rendered invisible. Policy should reframe internationalization metrics to prioritize epistemic pluralism, community

reciprocity, and inclusive impact over prestige and mobility counts. And future research should extend narrative inquiry across varied institutional contexts, integrate comparative policy analyses, and include transnational collaborators as co-authors to deepen understanding of equity-driven internationalization.

In conclusion, while internationalization in its dominant form often perpetuates coloniality and sustains exclusionary futures, the counterstories of these two PIs demonstrate that decolonial alternatives are both possible and necessary. These women reimagine internationalization not as a vehicle for reproducing Global North dominance, but as a pathway toward inclusive, pluralistic, and community-accountable futures in STEM higher education.

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## Bio

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