

## OUT OF THE BOX

### Hispanic Community in Greater Lafayette

**Student researcher:**  
**Sara King**

As I wandered the streets of Greater Lafayette conducting ethnographies, I noticed the many diverse faces and voices of the city. I asked myself, what might be the impact of these individuals? Why do they choose to speak in their native language? Are their opinions heard by English monolinguals? I know of a strange culture of ignorance at Purdue that lacks an extensive or in some cases even a surface-level understanding of the twin cities beyond the familiar realm of campus. I was reminded of the diversity of ideas brought about by the diversity of race and ethnicity, and I questioned whether the Hispanic community chose to be active within the white community, or if they had their own spatial, lingual, or cultural niche within the city. It became a goal of mine to explore cultural perspectives throughout Greater Lafayette, and to determine how non-native English speakers conceive of their civic identity in Lafayette.

As I conducted research, I quickly uncovered the presence of a Hispanic community in Lafayette with growing numbers. The vibrant culture of Latin America can be found sprinkled all throughout Lafayette and West Lafayette, whether on Purdue's campus, in the residences of Latino people, or in the commercial areas catered to them. At approximately 8,345 individuals, or 11.9%, Hispanic residents make up the second-largest race in Lafayette only after non-Hispanic whites (76.3%). Additionally, 5,215 residents are foreign-born (5% Latin American, 0.9% Asian), and a greater percentage of foreigners live in Lafayette than in Indiana taken as a whole. Near the southeastern city limits by Tippecanoe Mall and Ivy Tech, between 40 and 50 percent of the population consists of Hispanic people ("Lafayette, Indiana," n.d.).

My knowledge of and interest in Spanish, combined with curiosities about living in a new and diverse city, led me to confirm my research model. I chose to examine the usage and demographics of the Spanish language in Greater Lafayette and aspire to uncover the cultural and civic identity of the quaint city's colorful Hispanic population. By focusing on these aspects, we uncover the nature and extent of diversity in Greater

Lafayette, and are thus reminded to be accepting and welcoming toward those who differ from us. These invaluable lessons allow us to form intimate connections with the people around us, and not only to know our neighbors, but also to have an insight into their worldview.

### *Role of Cultural Centers*

I began my quest for answers on campus, looking for organizations or locations designated for Spanish speakers or people of Hispanic or Latino descent. The Latino Cultural Center (LCC) on Purdue's campus promises a safe zone and a home away from home for Latino students. Established in 2003, the center is full of resources for Spanish speakers. It offers a conference room, a study room, a multipurpose room, a computer lab, and an outdoor sand volleyball court. Inside, it is a designed just like a house, a noteworthy difference from the Black Cultural Center.

It is Día de Los Muertos, a Latin American celebration observed on November 1–2 that coincides with the Catholic and Christian holidays, All Souls Day and All Saints Day. Often misconceived as a celebration of death, Día de Los Muertos is in reality a celebration of life. The holiday is rooted in the Aztec and indigenous cultures of Mexico and is celebrated there and in Latino communities across North America (McClure, 2014). The LCC proudly displays *ofrendas*, or altars, in honor of the previous Latino students at Purdue and in memory of the 49 deaths in the Orlando Pulse shooting.

The development of cultural centers on predominantly white campuses is a growing phenomenon. Many students of color will ask for a safe space, a refuge, a place to go and just be themselves without feeling the pressures and constraints of an ever-present white community. In 1992, the media reminded the higher education community of the demand for cultural centers when they focused on the efforts of black students at the University of North Carolina to obtain funding and campus space for a black cultural center (Pittman, 1994). Affirmations of cultural identity and a vocal discontent with the dominant campus climate were echoed by many of the student leaders and their supporters. Essentially, students were challenging the institution to commit resources to a spoken mission of diversity.

## OUT OF THE BOX

Many institutions are now committing resources toward cultural centers and other support services for students of color. However, heated and divisive attacks on the cultural center concept are offered up too often in academic settings. Charges of separatism and reverse discrimination are hurled at students of color who, on most campuses, are numerically unable to pose the kind of threat that some critics believe is imminent. The academic and residential life of these students often requires them to negotiate and survive in white or otherwise integrated settings. The time spent in a cultural center, by comparison, is hardly significant enough to warrant said charges. Contrary to prevailing perceptions, research has shown that students of color are more likely to socialize outside of their racial and ethnic groups more than are white students. By necessity, students of color must be multidimensional in order to survive academically and socially, and the cultural center often compliments this developmental process (Pittman, 1994).

In the LCC's back room, there is a good-sized kitchen that gives off a cozy and relaxed feel, augmented by the candles atop the *ofrendas*. Churros and hot chocolate are served, a classic Spanish treat. Although the hot chocolate is bland, the atmosphere makes up for it. The LCC is bustling with life, and Spanish is spoken as frequently as English. Among the guests, I see an elderly man, several adults, college students, and even young children, all of whom have come together to celebrate Hispanic culture and tradition.

### *A Case Study on Ethnic Food Places*

As I journey downtown, I look for similar aspects that I have found at Purdue's cultural centers, such as culture-specific spatial boundaries. Mexican Americans are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States today. They are also the largest Hispanic group in the United States. The Mexican American population in 2000 was estimated at 20.6 million, making it the largest Mexican population outside of Mexico ("Mexican immigration," 2004). Mexicans alone make up 76% of Indiana's Hispanic population (Strange, 2013). As one of the country's fastest-growing immigrant groups, the Mexican community and its cuisine are becoming increasingly popular.

Mamá Inés Mexican Bakery on Sagamore Parkway in Lafayette is not your typical storefront pastry shop. It is huge in comparison,

and it looks like it could have been a house in a past life. There is a sign in Spanish on the front door requesting a part-time worker. When I enter the foyer, I am greeted by a number of colorful decorations. There is *papel picado* hanging from the ceilings, with cutouts of *calaveras*; there are piñatas, *esqueletos*, pumpkins, and an *ofrenda* decoration from Día de Los Muertos. There are old photographs of a man, a woman, and a family, along with an elaborate painting of a staircase. A stained glass door is labeled Banquet Hall. There are many intricately-decorated cakes on the display shelves, including one with seven layers and a wedding topper and one that is hanging upside down and modeled to look like a chandelier. I have taken a few cake-decorating courses myself, and I am amazed by the detail of each cake. I don't want to look away. Spanish music plays overhead, with the classic guitar sound.

For the time I am there (half an hour or so), there are maybe ten other customers, and only two speak in English. Several are accompanied by their young children, and a little girl of maybe five years carries her sleeping baby sister. She gives me an innocent grin, and I smile in return. Many of the labels are only in Spanish, and a few bear Spanish and English text. I purchase *pan de anoche*, for which the English translation reads "last night bread," for two dollars.

Rosa Montoya is the founder of Mamá Inés. She opened the bakery, named after her mother, in 1999 after acknowledging the growing Hispanic community in Lafayette. She wanted to bring Mexican products the community cherished and were accustomed to in attempt to make Lafayette feel more like home.

Rosa immigrated to the Lafayette area at the age of 16 in 1983 from the small village of Salazares Tlaltenango in Zacatecas, Mexico. Her mother, a single mom of ten children and Rosa's biggest role model, stayed behind. Penniless and without the emotional support of her mother, she fell into a deep depression that lasted nearly five years. No one spoke her language, and no one ate her food. Rosa began to feel isolated: "If you don't speak the language, and you don't have the money . . . you don't feel loved. It was actually probably one of the hardest things I've done. But in the long run, it was a great thing, those five years."

## OUT OF THE BOX

Fast forward, and the bakery is a popular hub for the Latino community of Lafayette. “Living in Lafayette is the best thing that has happened to me,” Rosa says. The bakery has truly helped Rosa integrate herself into Lafayette’s Hispanic community, and in the process, find a new place to call home.

### *Economics and Language*

While 13% of Indiana’s overall population lacks a high school diploma or GED, those numbers climb to 40% for Hispanic men and 37% for Hispanic women (Strange, 2013). In Tippecanoe County alone, an estimated 9,000 people don’t speak English proficiently, and 10,000 people aged 18–64 are without a high school degree. Lafayette is no excuse, and it is the reason why the Lafayette Adult Resource Center (LARA) offers English as a second language (ESL) classes in addition to high school diplomacy equivalents and other free services. For 30 years, LARA has been providing educational and career opportunities for students aged 16 and older. In addition to its classes, the center offers free job training, testing services, and one-on-one support.

Trish Maxwell was a high school dropout at 16, and education was about the last field in which she saw herself working. Yet, after graduating from an adult education high school herself and later earning an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and other credentials, she is the director of the adult resource center, a position she has proudly held for five years. Trish was always interested in social work, and she wished to be a change agent to help improve the lives of others. She started her work with the mindset that immediate safety concerns must be met—if you are hungry or unsafe, you cannot focus on education. A sort of philosophical shift led her to the field of education: she discovered that education, or lack thereof, was a huge barrier to economic transformation within a society. Trish’s work has led her from social services to addressing people’s immediate needs to education as a vehicle to promote permanent economic adjustment.

As Trish sees it, “the trajectory of being born into poverty is staying in poverty, except for one thing: in a democracy, education should be the vehicle for economic transformation.” Not only does LARA ensure that its students have learned the English language or received a credential, but the academy also

asks whether they have landed jobs, whether they still have those jobs a year later, and whether the job is growing in wages. By focusing on the whole continuum from entrance into the program to years after the student is hired for a job, Trish can ensure that LARA’s work provides not a temporary fix, but a permanent economic shift in the lives of individuals. “No Band-Aids,” she says.

Trish takes me on a brief tour of the facility. There are maybe six different classrooms and a childcare area where children of the students are read a book. We visit several of the classrooms, where I shake hands with smiling staff members and observe people taking tests, looking through textbooks, and talking among themselves. The students are of many different ethnicities and ages; several are Asian, some Latino, and some white. I am told that the ESL instructors teach students who have never spoken any English before all the way up to those who want to perfect their understanding of the language before entering graduate school or applying for a job. LARA’s ESL courses provide a unique opportunity. Not only do they allow for the economic growth of individuals, but they also expand their worldview and their concept of what it means to be a productive member of society.

### *Bilingualism*

Learning a second or third language has a multitude of personal, economic, and societal benefits. It broadens an individual’s worldview and cultural awareness. It provides a more comprehensive look into otherwise unknown lifestyles and traditions. Further, it helps to bring down the language barrier, an ideological concept perpetuated by those who are only familiar with one language. It can even change one’s sense of personal identity by giving him or her the choice to share new linguistic knowledge.

Differences in world languages create nuances that have the capacity to change the way in which we think. Collective evidence from a number of studies indicates that the bilingual experience improves the brain’s executive function, a system that directs the attention processes used for planning, solving problems, and completing other mentally challenging tasks. These processes include ignoring distractions, willfully switching between tasks,

## OUT OF THE BOX

and holding information in the mind, such as remembering a sequence of directions while driving (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This is exciting news because it means that by simply knowing more than one language, we have the ability to alter the neural connections in our brains and prime ourselves to be able to work harder, smarter, and more efficiently.

Bilingualism's effects also extend into our later years. A recent study of 44 elderly Spanish-English bilinguals at the University of California measured bilingualism through a comparative evaluation of proficiency in each language. Individuals with a higher degree of bilingualism were found to be more resistant to the onset of dementia and other symptoms of Alzheimer's disease: the higher the degree of bilingualism, the later the age of onset (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

In addition to societal and cognitive benefits, proficiency in more than one language positively affects personal income and large-scale economy. An investigation by Eduard Saiz and Elena Zoido of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University quantified the benefit of speaking different languages in addition to English. They found that, on average, Americans who mastered a language other than English increased their annual income by 2%. Another study conducted at the University of Texas found that children of immigrants who abandon their native language in adolescence tend to have lower incomes than those who retained it ("¿Cuál Es El Beneficio Económico," 2015). Additionally, acceptance rates for college and graduate schools, as well as employment rates, are higher for individuals who are proficient in two or more languages. The advantages of bilingualism are even more pronounced in recent generations, as young people entering the labor market are looking for jobs in companies that tend to operate in more globalized markets ("¿Cuál Es El Beneficio Económico," 2015).

As previously mentioned, learning a second or third language has an overwhelming number of personal and societal benefits. Rosa is living proof of the personal benefits. She introduces an interesting contrast between choosing to maintain native language, or to learn English. As a new resident of the United States, Rosa chose both. When I call her for the interview, I introduce myself in English, but I ask whether Rosa would rather answer my questions in English or Spanish, which I have written out in both languages. Although she

claims that her English isn't great, she speaks and understands the language with ease.

Learning English was not hard for Rosa. She didn't have the chance to go to school, so she learned English solely through speaking and listening. Back then, "everyone had to learn English no matter what," because lawyers, courts, and other businesses and services didn't have translators. Lafayette was small when Rosa moved here, but it has grown rapidly, and the Spanish-speaking population has grown with it. Resultantly, it is becoming easier for people who don't speak any English to live in Lafayette. At the same time, Rosa points out, "we don't force ourselves to learn English, because it is easier for us to use our language." Even now, she says, it can still be frustrating for her, like if she doesn't know a certain word: "But I try anyway. That doesn't stop me."

### *Afterword*

Community is a shared sense of space that dictates our relationships, identities, daily routines, and cultural assumptions; its constituents have a shared history and similar experiences. A community makes a place personal and subjective. Greater Lafayette's Hispanic community is more than present—it's flourishing. There are bakeries, restaurants, grocery stores, and delis that target the growing Hispanic community of Lafayette. There is a cultural center on Purdue's campus; there are classes for Spanish- and English-speaking practice and education; and there are residential and commercial areas with large percentages of Hispanics. These people, however, cannot be confined to only these places. Our perception of them must not be limited to the places where we are most likely to find them. The cultural diversity of Lafayette, and of the United States as a whole, continues to grow with each passing day. With new faces come original voices and innovative ideas, which contribute to the ever-expanding and evolving cultural identity of Lafayette.

Presenting myself in interviews, visiting Hispanic locations, and immersing myself in the culture of Lafayette has allowed me to value myself as a Purdue student, as a temporary citizen of Greater Lafayette, and as a person. I feel as if I have uncovered new meaning in my life because of the connections I have at LARA, Mamá Inés, and Bauer. Making these connections has allowed me to develop my civic identity and define myself through my expanded network of diverse people, thoughts, and personalities.

## OUT OF THE BOX

### References

- ¿Cuál es el beneficio económico de ser bilingüe en Estados Unidos? (2015, September 8). *BBC Mundo*. Retrieved from [http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150908\\_economia\\_beneficios\\_bilinguismo\\_if](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150908_economia_beneficios_bilinguismo_if)
- Bhattacharjee, Y. (2012, March 17). Why bilinguals are smarter. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-benefits-of-bilingualism.html>
- Lafayette, Indiana. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2016 from [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)
- McClure, Greg. (2014, October 22). Purdue's Latino Cultural Center to celebrate 'Día De Los Muertos.' *Purdue University News*. Retrieved December 11, 2016, from <https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2014/Q4/purdues-latino-cultural-center-to-celebrate-d%C3%ADa-de-los-muertos.html>
- Mexican immigration. (2004). In L. W. Baker & J. L. Outman (Eds.), *U.S. Immigration and Migration Reference Library* (vol. 2, pp. 617–649). Farmington Hills, MI: UXL.
- Pittman, E. (1994). Cultural centers on predominantly white campuses: Campus, cultural and social comfort equals retention. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 11(16).
- Strange, R. (2013). Exploring Hoosier minority groups: Indiana's Hispanic population. *InContext*, 14(4), article 3. Retrieved from <http://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2013/july-aug/article3.asp>