

The Program in Latina/o Studies at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill



Professor Rochelle Gutiérrez at UNC Chapel Hill October 2011 – Talk entitled, “Desarrollando Nepantler@s: Rethinking the Knowledge Needed to Teach Mathematics.”

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by Dr. María DeGuzmán

“What is the state of your Latina/o Studies program and what are best practices for nurturing Latina/o Studies in your institution?” These are the essential questions that inform this account of Latina/o Studies at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, the first program of its kind in North Carolina and in the Southeast. The second Latina/o Studies program to be founded shortly after the one at UNC Chapel Hill was Duke’s and the third one, Vanderbilt’s. When it comes to “best practices,” the local institutional context is key, and, yet, there are general principles to be extracted from the local context despite the idiosyncrasies of that context. When I began my tenure-track job at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 1999, Latina/o Studies per se did not exist at UNC or at any other institution of higher learning in North Carolina. Our program defines Latina/o Studies on our website as the transdisciplinary study of ethno-racially and linguistically diverse Latinas/os both in the U.S. and as they move between rest of the Americas or transnational spaces. Our definition includes those of Iberian heritage living and working in the U.S. alongside those of Latin American heritage and Mexicans who were made citizens of the U.S. in the 19th century and Puerto Ricans in 1900. We see the relationship between Latina/o Studies and Latin American Studies in this way:

*[While focusing on the United States,] Latina/o Studies is not confined within those borders either to the extent that its subjects of study (and the very creators of the field itself) are in motion and in flux, coming and going, continually crossing borders and boundaries. In this respect, it does share some of the transnational and transcultural scope, momentum, and issues of Latin American Studies but with its own foci, its own perspectives, that owe a great deal to Ethnic Studies and the knowledge produced in and through various intersecting civil rights movements. Latina/o Studies does not duplicate the work of Latin American Studies; it draws on it and complements it. Ideally, this scholarly relation works in reverse, too. Check out more information about the relation of Latin American and Latina/o Studies in the era of transnationalism and globalization in *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, edited by Juan Poblete. <http://lsp.unc.edu/>*

What did exist at UNC Chapel Hill were a number of scholars working in Latin American Studies in a variety of departments—African, African American, and Diaspora Studies, Anthropology, Geography, Romance Languages, and so forth. Some of these scholars were concentrating on questions of immigration to the United States that extended to the experiences of immigrants once in U.S. territory. There were also colleagues in other departments (including my own, then the Department of English and now the Department of English & Comparative Literature) who were cognizant of the importance of responding to the exponential population growth of “Hispanics” in the United States and particularly in North Carolina. As I explained in an article titled “Emerging Geographies of a Latina/o Studies Program” (about the program at UNC Chapel Hill) published in *Southeastern Geographer* (Vol. 51, No. 2, Summer 2011):

*According to U.S. Census and American Community data provided by Odem and Lacy (2009) from 1990 to 2006 North Carolina experienced a 678.4 percent increase in its “Hispanic” population—from 76,745 people to 597,382 or more than half a million people (xii). To fully take into account the “undocumented” one would have to increase those figures considerably—a calculation that might bring the North Carolina Latina/o population to over a million people or approximately one in eight people in North Carolina ten years into the 21st century. As the flagship campus of the University of North Carolina system, UNC – Chapel Hill had and continues to have both an intellectual and an ethical obligation to acknowledge and respond to the changing demographics of North Carolina and the Southeast more generally which, as a whole, according to Odem and Lacy (2009, p. xii), has amounted to at least a 345.1 percent increase of the “Hispanic” population between 1990 and 2006. [DeGuzmán, *Southeastern Geographer*, p. 308]*

Certainly, one of the strongest rationales for establishing the Program in Latina/o Studies at UNC Chapel Hill was:

*the exponential and myriad growth since the 1980s of Latina/o populations in the Southeast and North Carolina not only from Mexico, but also from Central America, and, of course, from other parts of the United States (such as California) as well as from places in South America such as Argentina, Colombia, and Ecuador, to name a few. [DeGuzmán, *Southeastern Geographer*, p. 308]*

How was the UNC Latina/o Studies Program actually created given the local institutional context I have described briefly? The Program grew out of a speakers’ series that I requested as part of my job package. I did not want to be the isolated scholar teaching Latina/o Studies to undergraduates and a small handful of graduate students each semester. So, I requested seed money to begin what I named the UNC Latina/o Cultures Speakers Series. The money was granted and my first speaker arrived to campus fall 1999. Since that fall the UNC Latina/o Cultures Speakers Series has hosted over fifty-eight people contributing to Latina/o Studies and/or culture—novelists, poets, playwrights, performance artists, visual artists, and/or academics. In terms of Latina/o Studies, the speakers series has explored a wide range of topics and has helped to diversify people’s understanding of what Latina/o Studies is and how it is related to, is composed of, and informs American Studies; Indigenous Studies; African, African American, and Diaspora Studies; Asian American Studies; Caribbean Studies; Central American Studies; Southern Studies; Feminist and LGBTQ Studies; Jewish Studies; Media Studies; research and teaching in education; law; healthcare; government; journalism; public policy; and so many other areas. The events of the UNC Latina/o Cultures Speakers Series drew people from all over campus and beyond who were interested in Latina/o studies and affairs. By keeping track of attendance at the UNC Latina/o Cultures Speakers Series I learned who on campus was invested in fomenting Latina/o Studies.

It was through the Latina/o Cultures Speakers Series that a core group of people became aware of how their scholarship and their interests could be brought together under the rubric of “Latina/o Studies” with a specific focus on what was happening within U.S. geographical boundaries. I asked

professors from this group of people who regularly attended the speakers' series events if they would like to propose Latina/o Studies courses or could adjust the courses they were teaching to dedicate at least fifty percent of their course material to the experiences and cultural productions of Hispanics living within the geographical boundaries of the United States. A sufficient number of professors were willing to either create new courses or transform already existing courses so that we were able to propose an undergraduate minor in Latina/o Studies, a minor that was approved March 2004 and inaugurated September 20, 2004 with the visit of Professor Frances Aparicio. With this inauguration the Minor & the UNC Latina/o Studies Speakers Series became the Program in Latina/o Studies at UNC Chapel Hill. Since fall 2004 other speakers series have been introduced under the aegis of the Program: The Teatro Latina/o Speakers Series as well as speakers series associated with a variety of working groups on Latina/os & Health, Latina/os & Education, Literature of the Americas, and Jewish Latina/o Cultural Production. Thus, a little more than ten years later, at least two and sometimes three speakers series and several working groups operate as part of our Latina/o Studies Program. We have a core group of faculty who are passionate about examining Latina/o historical and contemporary presence in the United States; the experiences of Latina/os in the U.S. educational system; the health and educational consequences of Latina/o migration (particularly to the U.S. South) and Latina/o migration as it shapes and is shaped by public policy; the cultural productions of Caribbean Latina/o writers and visual artists; Latina/o music, theater, and performance art; the relation of Latina/o literature to other kinds of media—photography, film, journalism; Afro-Latina/o histories and cultures; and Jewish Latina/o cultural production among other areas of research, pedagogy, and programming.

Since its inception (including the establishment of the first speakers series that is still continuing) the Program in Latina/o Studies has been housed in the UNC Chapel Hill Department of English & Comparative Literature (formerly the Department of English). At UNC Chapel Hill a minor has to be housed in one particular department even if it is transdisciplinary, which ours is, as Latina/o studies programs generally are. Our Latina/o Studies Program offers courses drawn from over ten different departments, among them Anthropology; African, African American, and Diaspora Studies; Dramatic Arts; English & Comparative Literature; Geography; History; Music; Public Policy; Religious Studies; Romance Languages; and the School of Journalism & Mass Communication. As founding director of the Program in Latina/o Studies I made the decision, in consultation with other faculty, to house the minor and the overall program in the Department of English & Comparative Literature because I wanted these studies to be considered an integral part of the study of U.S. culture and of literature written in English though not necessarily, of course, confined to English. The fact that the Department of English became the Department of English & Comparative Literature has strengthened the logic of domiciling Latina/o Studies in this department, as Latina/o Studies is, by definition, fundamentally comparative. The comparative nature of Latina/o Studies pervades all aspects and angles of its investigations—from the study of race and ethnicity, to national origin, to class, to geography, to historical contexts, to politics, to philosophy, aesthetics, and spirituality, to bilingualism and, furthermore, multilingualism as scholars must take into account not only Spanish and English but many variations on their combination in addition to indigenous languages as well as, potentially, other Romance Languages such as Portuguese and French.

The UNC Program in Latina/o Studies that grew out of the UNC Latina/o Cultures Speakers Series has been in existence since 2004. Over the course of eleven years it has expanded in terms of its programming, the number of faculty involved, and the number and range of courses offered. At the department level it is both an undergraduate and a graduate program, but at the College of Arts & Sciences level it is still an undergraduate program. Graduate students can take whatever graduate level Latina/o Studies courses are offered. Graduate students from the Department of English & Comparative Literature can declare Latina/o Studies as one of their fields. However, we still do not have a College of Arts & Sciences-wide graduate program in Latina/o Studies. The establishment of such a program is one of our goals. Another related goal is to foment a Southeastern Consortium of Latina/o Studies. The Program in Latina/o Studies at UNC – Chapel Hill has already been

collaborating on programming and course credit with Duke University's Program in Latino/a Studies in the Global South. A larger Southeastern consortium in Latina/o Studies would have the potential to open regular channels of communication among the various Latina/o Studies programs in the region and to create a synergistic constellation of scholarly production, creative endeavor, professional opportunities, and database resources.

As for best practices, I would say the following: 1. Make sure to keep your Latina/o Studies program "alive" and visible each semester through speakers' series, working groups, and other kinds of venues that attract a variety of participants—faculty and graduate students from a range of departments, undergraduates, administration, staff, alumni/ae, donors, and interested members of the greater community. 2. Have a clear mission and a strong intrinsic reason for the location or institutional positioning of Latina/o Studies whether it is housed in a particular department or is "free standing" as its own department. Both scenarios present opportunities, challenges, limitations, and frustrations, especially in public universities currently struggling to find adequate funding. 3. Generate activities (i.e., speakers series) and participate in organizing structures (regional consortiums and national associations) that place your program in a network of programs and keep it visible beyond the immediate institutional and/or local frames of reference. 4. Be pro-active in engaging administrators, students, and the wider community in which your Latina/o Studies Program is situated about the specific contributions that your program is making to the education and professional preparation of your institution's undergraduates and graduate students and to the professional development and support of the faculty associated with your program. 5. Keep the offerings of the program fresh and open to new ideas by experimenting with more micro-scale programming that can be managed by graduate and undergraduate students who would like to professionalize themselves through involvement with the planning, advertising, and hands-on management of audio-visual documentation of your events, the creation and maintenance of internet presence (via a website or other digital media tools), speakers series, working groups, conferences, panel presentations, film screenings, and art shows. 6. Advertise and document everything that your program in Latina/o Studies does—via websites, a listserv, judiciously employed social media, and word of mouth. 7. Engage your university's libraries (including art and film libraries) and archives whenever possible to be sure that the libraries are keeping pace with the scholarly endeavors in Latina/o Studies on your campus and that the university archivists are informed about the institutional value of your program and that they are willing to help you preserve documents and other materials pertaining to the creation and development of your program. 8. If you find yourself attempting to foment Latina/o Studies in a geographical area with very few Latinas/os or at a school with a low minority population, consider who your best allies might be in terms of already existing colleagues, programs, curricula, and departments and encourage them to explore Latina/o experiences and cultural productions within the rubric of what they are already doing. 9. In your own teaching, devise ways of introducing the perspectives and critical tools generated by Latina/o Studies to whatever material you may be teaching—even when you are asked to teach courses that are not explicitly Latina/o Studies courses. In other words, treat Latina/o Studies not only as subject matter, but also as a critical lens or, rather, an array of critical lenses through which you, your colleagues, and your students can examine any subject. I have taught a number of otherwise rather traditional U.S. literature surveys this way. In fact, I am teaching one such class now. I call it "Night Optics of the U.S. Novel." The first novel on our list is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934) and we are analyzing it through the lenses of critical paradigms furnished by Latina/o Studies (for example, the challenge offered by Latina/o Studies to black/white binary conceptions of race and ethnicity in the United States). A Latina/o Studies-inflected approach to a U.S. classic like Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night* is yielding some impressive insights among the students and I look forward to their essays on this and the other novels we are reading for this class. I highly recommend making Latina/o Studies relevant to whatever you find yourself having to teach. This method allows you to introduce students to Latina/o Studies in a manner that de-ghettoizes it and that encourages all students, regardless of major and/or minor, to find use value in the contributions of Latina/o Studies.

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Works Cited:

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