



# Welcoming New Americans: A Perspective from South Dakota

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**Abstract:** At a historically turbulent juncture, this presentation has two aims. Firstly, it directs attention to the lack of representation of Latinx people in research. It points at rural and urban Latinx communities in South Dakota, which remain overlooked despite the Pew Research Center (Sept. 8, 2016) identifying it as having the fastest growing Latino/a population among all states from 2000 to 2014. Secondly, this presentation advances practices in the humanities at South Dakota State University (SDSU) that support newcomer populations to help them integrate into their communities. Through community partnerships, the Department of Modern Languages and Global Studies has sought to reinsert the humanities in the land grant mission. Answering Lou Anna Simon's call to action in "Embracing the World Grant Ideal" (2010), we argue that liberal arts disciplines must find ways to participate in the outreach of the applied and professional fields. We must maintain the land grant's commitment to fostering inclusiveness and finding opportunities to work with diverse peoples. Finally, we must make connections between local and global communities, because the global has already reached us. To put some very basic numbers behind this claim, there are currently 18+ languages and 24 nationalities on the Tyson Fresh Meats floor in Dakota Dunes alone, and there are many more examples around us of a more multicultural and multilingual society. As such, if the university is to accomplish its land grant mission, it must serve new Americans; and must include the following five areas of critical engagement: English as a Second Language, Translation Services, Legal Support, Workforce Development, and Diversity and Intercultural Competence. This portion of the presentation illustrates how the Department of Modern Languages and Global Studies has focused our efforts in each of these critical areas.

Turning first to the question of Latinx immigrants and newcomers to South Dakota, it is important to remember that recent research on Latinx in the Midwest routinely reveal two constants, namely, the idea that Latinx are not newcomers to the region (Valerio-Jiménez et al., 2017), and that the study of this increasingly important group is not a new phenomenon. In fact, in the introduction to the volume *Latinos in the Midwest*, Rubén O. Martínez traces the systematic study of this community in the region to the late 1920s (p. 3). However, when it comes to investigation about Latinxs in South Dakota, in the best of cases, regional studies merely acknowledge the state as part the Midwest region (Acosta, 2017; Gouveia & Saenz, 2000; Saenz, 2011). In most cases, South Dakota is not mentioned at all, with studies focusing on the Midwestern states with the largest populations, such as Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, or Wisconsin. The only studies that we were able to find that engage the South Dakota Latinx population in some depth were two projects out of the Rural Sociology Department at South Dakota State University (SDSU). One is a Ph.D. dissertation titled, "Community Embeddedness and Residential Plans of Latino Dairy Farm Workers in Rural South Dakota Counties," which was defended by Joel Javier Vargas in 2010. The second was an article in a 2007 Rural Life Census Data Center Newsletter titled, "Hispanics in South Dakota" by T. Brooks, M. McCurry, and D. Hess, who confirmed Latinx immigration to South Dakota between 2000 and 2007. Unfortunately, this research has not resulted in further scholarly publications.

The paucity of research on Latinx in South Dakota requires our attention considering that the Pew Research Center (2016) identifies the state as having the fastest growing Latinx population among the 50 states and the District of Columbia from 2000 to 2014. The Pew study informs us that "South Dakota's Latino population has nearly tripled, reaching 29,000 in 2014 – up from 10,000 in 2000" (Stepler, 2016; Krogstad, 2016). In the context of the *Cambio de Colores* 2019 Conference, the plenary keynote titled "Bridging the Divides in the Immigration Debate," Denzil Mohammed

similarly called out the Dakotas as two of the states with the fastest growing Latinx populations in the country, asking only half-jokingly, "What do they know about Latinx immigrants in South Dakota?" Sadly, if we look at the extant research, the answer appears to be not much – locally and nationwide.

In spite of historical missteps and failures, institutions of higher education are essential to raising awareness about the presence and contributions of marginalized communities. Therefore, here we take a moment to point to some potential South Dakota places and activists that merit further research. For instance, Hill City in western South Dakota boasts a vibrant Latinx community and a decades-long history of Mexican immigrants who work mostly in the logging industry (Carrigan, 2011). A scholarly record of the history of this community could help complicate narratives that can be used to justify their exclusion and marginalization by positing Latinx as recent (read: illegal) migrants or interlopers who lack deep roots in the historical narratives of the region. To paraphrase Ramón Rivera-Servera, Hill City offers a great opportunity to do the important work of recognizing, documenting, and celebrating (Valerio-Jiménez et al., 2017) Latinx populations, their contributions to the state, and their histories in South Dakota. This new scholarship, in turn, would further integrate the Midwest in general and South Dakota in particular "into the broader Latina/o studies field imaginary" (Valerio-Jiménez et al., 2017, p. 17).

Although the Latinx presence is quickly increasing in cities across the state such as Huron, Box Elder, Belle Fourche, and Rapid City, the most populous city in the state, Sioux Falls, merits our attention because of the diversity of its minority populations. The fast-growing global city of 265,000 people is home to 145 different languages. According to Juan Bonilla, president and founder of Global Voice Inc. and chair of the Sioux Falls Diversity Council, "English, Spanish, Swahili, Russian, and Arabic" are the most widely spoken (Zwemke, 2013). The Latinx population of the city includes diverse U.S. citizens coming

to South Dakota from other states to work in agriculture, banking, real estate, higher education institutions, finance or restaurants (Santella, 2018), but as Bonilla points out, it also includes diverse groups arriving from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico (Young, 2012). For the purposes of this essay, we need to know that Puerto Rican Bonilla has been the host of *La Voz*, a 3-hour bilingual radio show that has aired every Sunday out of the University of Sioux Falls (USF) for more than ten years (Someone You Should Know, 2017). There is much to learn about Bonilla and his radio program that has inspired and eased the adaptation of the Latinx community to the Sioux Empire, with a following of 100,000 listeners (The “Sioux Empire” refers to the area in and around Sioux Falls, SD, including adjacent cities in the southwest corner of Minnesota, the northeast corner of Nebraska, and the northwest corner of Iowa). Supporters recognize *La Voz* as an empowering educational source for the community; the weekly show teaches established and new Latinx people about their heritage, comforts and helps them understand their history as well as remember where they come from (Someone You Should Know, 2017). Another important cultural resource for Latinx in eastern South Dakota is Nitza Rubenstein. An immigrant from Honduras, the restaurant owner Rubenstein has been the driving force in the creation of an ad hoc multicultural center in Flandreau, SD. In conjunction with South Dakota State University (SDSU) and local community organizations, the “center” teaches weekly ESL classes to a group of salvadoreños, hondureños, nicaragüenses, guatemaltecos, and mexicanos. This unique “town and gown” collaboration also provides much-needed services, such as translators, interpreters, and legal support. In this way, this brief signposting for future research opportunities also reveals how universities can become critical community engagement partners. Bonilla’s radio program *La Voz* and Rubenstein’s venture coexist with the financial support and content expertise provided by USF and SDSU. These collaborations demonstrate how meaningful alliances between the community and higher education institutions can be sources of survival for both longstanding and

recent communities, help consolidate community ties, and create a sense of belonging.

In fact, as the state’s land grant institution and the largest university in the regental system, SDSU has had a considerable Latinx extension and outreach presence for at least a decade. However, until recently, much of this important work was taking place in disciplinary silos. For instance, the Dairy Science department began teaching a 1-credit “Dairy Spanish” course in the mid-2010s to help Anglo students better communicate with Latinx workers at the many dairy farms of the region (Pates, 2016). During this same period, the Department of Modern Languages and Global Studies (MLGS) developed a service-learning course that placed Spanish-speaking students at local dairy farms to teach ESL courses to employees and also offer translation and interpretation services for needs such as housing and banking. After seeing a departmental flyer of MLGS in 2014, Dr. Maristela Rovai, a dairy extension specialist at SDSU, contacted Dr. Christine Garst-Santos, a Spanish professor in MLGS, and thus was born a friendship and professional collaboration that has changed the way we communicate across campus and the way faculty think about the role of the humanities in the land grant mission.

Through a series of innovative collaborations across campus and throughout the community, the Department of Modern Languages and Global Studies at SDSU has sought to reinsert the humanities in the land grant mission. Answering Lou Anna Simon’s call to action in *Embracing the World Grant Ideal* (2009), we argue that the traditional liberal arts disciplines must find ways to participate in the outreach efforts of the applied and professional fields. Furthermore, we must maintain the land grant’s founding commitment to fostering and celebrating inclusiveness (especially given that these institutions have not always lived up to this ideal) and seek out opportunities to work with and learn from diverse peoples and organizations. Finally, we must make connections between local and global communities because the global has already reached

us right here in South Dakota. To put some very basic numbers behind this claim, there are currently 18+ languages spoken from 24 nations on the Tyson Fresh Meats floor in Dakota Dunes; Dakota Provisions in Huron recruited workers in Puerto Rico last year to add to its already diverse workforce (of note, 23% of the inhabitants of this town of 13,000 speak a language other than English); Bel Brands in Brookings is looking for ESL classes for its French-speaking employees from various countries in Africa; Twin City Fan is looking to relocate 52 refugee families from Myanmar to Brookings; 23 families from Central America arrived in Flandreau in November 2018 to work in surrounding dairies and processing plants; there are 22 dairies in Brookings County with an estimated 650 Latinx employees, and there are currently 300 unaccompanied minors who have been resettled in SD by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. As such, if the university is to accomplish its land grant mission in the twenty-first century, we argue that it must serve existing and new Americans; and its efforts must include the following five areas of critical engagement: English as a Second Language, Translation/Interpretation Services, Legal Support, Workforce Development, and Diversity/Intercultural Competence Training.

We end this paper with a discussion of how the Department of Modern Languages and Global Studies (now part of the School of American and Global Studies) at South Dakota State University has refocused our teaching, research, and service efforts in each of these areas in recent years. Working with an array of interdisciplinary collaborators both on and off campus, we are teaching our students that the humanitarian and workforce needs “unfolding in one’s own backyard link directly to challenges occurring throughout the nation and the world” – and we are opening up new curricular and outreach possibilities to exercise active citizenship to address these challenges (Simon, 2009, p. 5).

Before we briefly explore the work being done in the five areas identified above, we are happy to report that the department is in the process

of launching a Center for New Americans and American Culture. This center will be a public humanities and applied social sciences service center, tentatively offering services in the five need areas. These services and the center itself have developed organically as the department increasingly is called upon by the community to provide this expertise. That is, just as there has been a historical demand for extension economists or dairy scientists, in the globalized twenty-first century, we also are seeing a demand for extension humanists, if you will.

The first two service areas, teaching English as a Second Language and providing translation and interpretation services, connect our students and faculty with their newcomer neighbors and acknowledge our role as stakeholders in South Dakota’s global future. Through both formal service-learning courses and informal volunteerism, our students teach ESL at a variety of locations, including a community center in Elkton, a restaurant in Flandreau, local dairy farms, and processing plants. Through our translation and interpretation services, we connect newcomers with industry partners and local businesses and schools. Although many of these services are offered pro bono for public schools and non-profits, industry partners are frequently willing and able to pay for these services, with modest revenue flowing back to support other projects at the Center.

The third service area, Legal Support, came about thanks to a serendipitous collaboration between the SD Bar Association Immigration Committee and MLGS. About four years ago, one of the Committee’s co-chairs invited us to accompany her and a group of law students to one of the family detention centers in Dilley, Texas in order to serve as interpreters and legal volunteers. The weeklong trip was life changing for both students and faculty, putting us in touch with several local, state, and national legal advocacy non-profits. These collaborations provide our students with valuable career and law school preparation and connect newcomers with pro bono lawyers and advocacy groups who can assist them along com-

plicated legal paths.

The fourth and fifth service areas, Workforce Development and Diversity/Intercultural Competence Training, are two sides to the same coin. The former connects newcomers to job training through traditional extension venues. The innovation here is to connect the liberal arts disciplines to the applied sciences, ensuring, for example, that the dairy science extension specialist is sharing information on legal screening workshops hosted by the humanists with dairy employees. The latter, however, equips existing Americans with the tools needed to facilitate the integration of their new neighbors and colleagues. Several faculty are now trained to lead diversity workshops for industry partners and to serve as consultants for businesses wanting to hire and/or develop existing newcomer populations. We have also created new courses and academic credentials designed to equip both traditional and non-traditional students with socio-linguistic and cultural awareness, a grasp of global issues and trends, and the ability to shift cultural perspectives, adapt behaviors, and communicate across differences. In sum, we are educating a new generation of interculturally competent global citizens in South Dakota.

Despite the challenging current political environment but inspired by Francisco A. Villarruel's call in the foreword to the volume *Latinos in the Midwest*, the authors of this paper invite scholars from diverse disciplines such as sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political scientists, artists, and literary scholars to join our efforts to advance a more complete knowledge of Latinx in the Midwest and – moreover – to take our academic research from theory to praxis. In this sense, we look forward to the time when South Dakota and its Latinx communities will become more than just a footnote or a polite acknowledgment in texts that engage the multifarious experiences of Latinx in the United States of America.

Authors' Note: Due to limited space, we are not able to detail the many collaborators who have made these innovations possible. If readers are

interested in learning how these services have developed and the various academic units, community organizations, and people with whom we have worked in each area, please reach out to us via email at [christine.garst-santos@sdstate.edu](mailto:christine.garst-santos@sdstate.edu).

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