

University of St. Joseph
Hispanic Heritage Month Keynote Speech
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Thank you for that very kind introduction, Dr. Lopez. Estella and I have been friends for many years, a friendship that began when we worked together in the City University of New York System. We are very fortunate to have an educational leader such as Dr. Lopez supporting the higher education and Latino communities.

I also want to thank Professor Madeine Perez from the Social Work program and director of the Institute for Latino Community Practice for inviting me to speak with you this evening. I am honored to be this year's ILCP Research Lecturer for this Hispanic Heritage Month celebration.

And I welcome all of our students, faculty, Advisory Board members, and other guests this evening — thank you for taking the time to join me for tonight's lecture.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I would like to step back and ask the people in the room tonight to join me in a prayer and moment of silence for the millions of people in Puerto Rico, Mexico and other areas of the Caribbean Basin who are suffering from the recent hurricanes and earthquakes in the region.

(Moment of silence)

Whether you are from a Latin American country or another part of the world, these are the times to share in our humanity to support those suffering from the natural disasters that struck Puerto Rico, Texas, Florida, Mexico and the Caribbean islands.

I know that the University of St. Joseph, like Eastern, has plans in the works to support the relief efforts taking place in those communities. Thank you all for whatever you can do to join the world community in responding to the devastation that we have seen on our TV screens.

I was asked to speak tonight about the broad topics found in my book, "Hanging Out and Hanging On, From the Projects to the Campus." Dr. Perez tells me that she has been inspired by the book. The fact is, the work she and her colleagues are doing in the Institute for Latino Community Practice inspires **ME!**

More than 30 percent of the students on this campus are ethnic minorities, and the campus as a whole and the Institute in particular are working very hard to promote educational access and a greater understanding of cultural differences on campus.

The Institute has put in place a number of strategies to recruit and retain Latino students, ranging from bilingual financial aid workshops, to sponsoring

career exploration programs in local high schools, to hiring a bilingual admissions counselor. On campus, the Institute sponsors a wide range of forums, workshops and ongoing dialog on issues related to the Latino experience. I am especially impressed with the annual reception you host for Latino students and their families to celebrate each year that a student is retained on campus.

And the Adelante Circle of Support for nontraditional students reminds all of us that inclusion means caring about and supporting all our constituencies.

The Institute is also dedicated to taking the lessons being learned and sharing them broadly through a program of student and faculty research; professional development, and outreach. Through all this work, you are making the words “Community” and “Practice” come alive!

As we work to increase the number of Latino students on our campuses and promote greater cultural awareness, I want to put our current efforts in context with the history of Latinos in Connecticut, going back to World War II. Let’s begin by defining what it means to be a Latino. How many of you were born in Puerto Rico? RAISE YOUR HANDS.

How many of you are second- or third-generation U.S. residents whose parents or grandparents are from Puerto Rico? RAISE YOUR HANDS. How many of you were born in Mexico? RAISE YOUR HANDS. How many of you have parents or grandparents who came from Mexico? RAISE YOUR HANDS. How many of you have families from another Central American country — from Guatemala to Panama? RAISE YOUR HANDS. How many of you have families from a South American country — Columbia down to the southern tip of Argentina? RAISE YOUR HANDS.

Despite the fact we come from more than 20 different nationalities, we are all called Hispanics or Latinos, artificial labels that I will speak more about in a few minutes. But we certainly share a language and many cultural similarities.

When I speak now about the life of Latinos in Connecticut over the past 50-60 years, I suspect much of what I tell you will resonate loudly, whether you grew up in Connecticut or in another part of the country.

Let me give you a brief sense of my own background as I go back in time to look at the history of Latinos in Connecticut. I was born in the western mountains of Puerto Rico in a beautiful town called San Sebastian. It is in the coffee growing part of the island. Neither of my parents had more than an 8th grade education, but like most parents, they worked hard to support their family and they had aspirations for a better life for their children. This commitment to finding a better life for me and my siblings caused my father to immigrate to America.

He ended up in Newark, New Jersey, and brought the rest of us there to live. My parents worked for many years in the Fedders air conditioning factory there, and I learned to navigate life in the housing projects.

I later had the fortune of getting my college degree, earning my doctorate, becoming a college professor, and eventually entered the administrative ranks at the City College of New York and other institutions. When I moved to Connecticut to become the President of Eastern Connecticut State University in 2006, I learned more about the life of Latino families in Connecticut, and discovered a pattern of struggle and sacrifice similar to my own.

Most Latinos in Connecticut before and during World War II were Puerto Ricans, drawn by the promise of better wages and the comfort of knowing their U.S. citizenship gave them some equal footing in the States. They worked in the munition factories in Bridgeport, in the Winchester rifle factory in New Haven, in the tanning and furniture factories in Danbury. After the war, migrant workers were recruited from Puerto Rico to pick vegetables and fruits throughout the state. But the biggest draw for Puerto Ricans was “Tobacco Alley” — more than 200 tobacco farms covering 2,700 square miles between Hartford and Springfield, Massachusetts.

Tens of thousands of workers from Puerto Rico faced 12-14 hour days of hard labor in the fields, seven days a week. They slept in barns, 50-60 men to a barn, usually without sanitation and plumbing.

Other workers lived in camps surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards. While they got paid, the deductions taken out of their paychecks for meals, health insurance, and the cost of the airplane ticket to fly to Connecticut from Puerto Rico, often took as much as 2/3rds of a man’s paycheck.

I was also shocked to learn of the history of Puerto Ricans in Willimantic, Connecticut, home to Eastern Connecticut State University. Many were flown from Puerto Rico to work in the Hartford Poultry Company, which processed 3,000 chickens an hour. Most of the workers were women, who worked long hours during the day using sharp, dangerous scissors, only to sleep two to a bed at night, locked in their rooms.

“Norberto” also worked at the poultry plant, killing 40,000 chickens a day for processing. In a 1984 book on Willimantic, he said, “I worked there two months; if I hadn’t left, I would have died there.”

The other large employer in Willimantic was the American Thread Company, which was Connecticut’s largest employer in the 1890s and the largest manufacturing plant in the world in 1892. It was still Willimantic’s largest employer in the 1960s, when it recruited Puerto Ricans to work in its mills. Some floors in the mills featured only Spanish-speaking workers, and they had to put up with a great deal of prejudice and resentment from French-Canadian, Polish, Italian, and other national groups who felt they had been passed over for work.

Puerto Ricans weren’t paid well, they lived in substandard housing, and the benefits of a college education were largely unavailable.

In the 1960s, before bilingual education programs, students who could not speak English were often put into Special Education classes. When I came to Newark, New Jersey, in the mid-1950s, I also could speak no English. My teacher put me in a corner with a developmentally disabled boy and we drew animals together for the entire year. I learned to speak English by reading the newspaper and eventually escaped from the despair of neglect.

The National Council of La Raza cites research that shows a Latino child who cannot speak English when they enter first grade is a full year behind his or her classmates — the day they walk into class. By the fifth grade, the gap is two years.

In Connecticut, almost 80,000 families speak only Spanish in the home. Yet while the number of students in bilingual programs in Connecticut has grown by more than 10,000 students in recent years, the number of certified bilingual teachers has dropped more than 30 percent. You cannot get a driver's license, keep a job, or be an informed citizen if you cannot speak, read and write in English in this country!

This issue of literacy is only one barrier to educational access and academic performance in the Latino community. I am going to share with you data that shows the dramatic difference in the academic performance of poor, urban children — especially Latino and African American children — and the performance of affluent, suburban white children.

While the probability of low performance increases among minorities and in urban settings, the key determinant is family income. The cycle of poverty that spans generations continues to exact its toll on far too many families in our state and nation.

It is important to understand that the “Achievement Gap” I am about to describe is not something that children exhibit at birth. In fact, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that at age nine months, all children show the same mental acuity and gross motor development. **All children, period.** Regardless of race, the employment level of the mother, whether or not the mother has a parental partner, the mother's income or the mother's educational attainment. **The same mental acuity.**

In fact, the only factor that seems to impact the level of mental activity is the birth weight of the child. Children born prematurely or with a lower birth weight are below average in mental agility at age nine months. That certainly speaks to the need for nutritional programs for pregnant women, but beyond that . . . **we are truly all born equally.**

By age two, the effects of poverty begin to appear, and by age four, children are on divergent paths. Those in affluent, stable households — homes full of books, nutritional food, and intellectual stimulation—are doing well. Children

who go to bed hungry each night in dangerous neighborhoods and single-parent households aren't doing so well.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the national clearinghouse of K-12 data in our country. Each state conducts testing at the 4th, 8th, and 12 grade levels in reading, writing, science and mathematics. How does our state of Connecticut do in the testing? **Connecticut has the largest gap in the academic achievement of its K-12 students in the nation!** The gap between students of color, urban students, and those from low-income families and their white, suburban, more affluent counterparts is evident in all four areas tested for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — reading, math, writing, and science —and at all 3 testing levels —4th, 9th, and 12th grades. Depending on the testing year and subject matter, the performance gap ranges from 20-40 percent. What are some long-term effects of the achievement gap?

- 42% of Latinos have not finished high school, almost three times more than whites.
- At the same time that approximately 30 percent of all American adults have a bachelor's degree, fewer than 13 percent of Latinos do.
- In Connecticut, 27 percent of Hispanics are below the poverty line, compared to 6.2% of whites.

What can we do to change this dynamic? How can we eliminate the achievement gap that stands in the way of educational and career success for Latino youth?

I have already shared some of the work being done at the University of St. Joseph by the Institute for Latino Community Practice and others. St. Joseph's core values are clearly stated and firmly embedded in the daily life on this campus.

The spiritual life inherent in your Catholic identity. A dedication to service and compassion. And a commitment to respecting individuals from different cultures and backgrounds while promoting an inclusive, welcoming community.

This lecture series is one example of those values. Tomorrow's Diversity Day is another excellent opportunity for students and other members of the USJ community to explore issues of race, ethnicity, class and gender. Clearly, this campus is working hard to serve the Latino community and work on some of the social issues I addressed in my book and have reviewed tonight.

On my own campus, we share St. Joseph's commitment to educational access, social equality, and cultural awareness.

As your program notes, the Dual College Enrollment Program on our campus — a program I started in 2007, many colleagues helped establish the

program — has been successful in taking students from Hartford and other inner city high schools, and enrolling them at Eastern. <TELL STORY>

The program has several pillars that have made it successful. Perhaps most important is that students live on our campus, far from the street violence and instability of their home neighborhoods. We also have a strong system of support services ranging from peer tutoring to professional advising. Students in the program also benefit from being mentored by their work-study supervisors — the people who see them more each week than any single faculty member.

What impact has the Dual College Enrollment program had on participants? Of the program's first 50 students, almost 50 percent graduated or were on track to graduate within six years, a figure that compares favorably with the University's overall six-year graduation rate of just over 50 percent. In ten years, we have had hundreds of students in the program, and we continue to see participants graduate each year and proudly walk across the stage at Commencement.

Now I would like to share a short video of the program so that you can hear first-hand from several of the program's graduates. **(SHOW VIDEO)**

In closing, I would like to step back and put some context around the work of the Institute for Latino Studies and the work taking place on my own campus. There are three related yet distinct reasons why we do this work.

First, we support educational access for people from underrepresented populations to help them fulfill their dream of getting a college degree. We know how important a college education is in achieving social and economic mobility in this country. Everyone deserves that opportunity. Empowering Latino students to aspire to go to college, to become professionals — doctors, social workers, architects, lawyers — must continue to be our focus. It is simply the right thing to do.

We also support Latino studies on our campuses because our own people deserve to celebrate and preserve our common culture. I asked earlier where all of you are from — what your nation of origin is. Let us understand that there is no such thing as a Latino. There is no such thing as a Hispanic. Those are artificial, concocted terms of convenience for the Census Bureau and statisticians. Each of us comes from a national heritage and the people from each of those countries — Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and all the other nations that constitute Latin America — deserve respect and the opportunity to express their culture. Too often, second- and third-generation Latinos in this country, children whose parents and grandparents left their homelands long ago, have only a dim understanding of where they come from.

We have a right to be proud of our families, our home countries, and our common heritage. We love our families, we love our God, and we work hard to take care of our families. In celebrating this heritage, we gain strength.

Finally, at the same time that we empower individual Latino students and celebrate the variety of national cultures among us, there is another critical role that organizations like the Institute for Latino Studies plays on college campuses. As much as we support members of our Latino community, the impact that cultural awareness has on the entire campus community may be our most important function.

We know too well what is taking place in this nation and in the world today. Renewed racial tension and distrust has fueled violence and hatred.

The victories for equality and justice that many of us fought hard to win over the past 50 years are at risk. Bigotry and ignorance are rearing their ugly heads once again. But we can change that.

There is no better place than a college campus to promote cultural understanding and respect. There is no better time than during a student's time on our campuses to teach and instill values that they will carry with them throughout their lives.

On my own campus, we have affluent students from Greenwich rooming with first-generation students from Bridgeport. Doctor's sons from Darien sit in class next to minority students from New London and Manchester. Together for the first time, they learn that they are far more alike than different.

They learn to draw strength from their common humanity while celebrating their differences. They learn how to debate issues respectfully.

These are the skills and values necessary for a free democracy to thrive. And make no mistake — there are forces in our nation who are working very hard to attack our democracy. They criticize higher education, not for our mistakes, but for our very existence. They preach a rhetoric of absolutism and isolation.

The image of a Puerto Rico without electricity — in shadow and waiting for relief — and the vision of a wall separating our nation from Mexico are powerful symbols of the politics of “us vs. them” that dominates our country today. We cannot let it stand.

“We” are all of “us.” There can be no “them.” In the face of bigotry, we cannot waver. In the face of ignorance, our response must be to shed light on the truth, educating everyone who will listen on our shared values and our shared human experience.

So the work of the Institute and all the people in this room tonight is not simply to increase the number of Latinos getting a college degree. It is not simply to celebrate our rich heritage. We must actively support a spirit of inclusion on our campuses and specific programs that ensure the diversity of opinion that is the foundation of our democracy.

Social change cannot occur overnight. It is a daily dialog, like the one we are having tonight. Justice is not like a baseball game, where someone wins, someone loses, and everyone goes home.

Justice must be fought for and won each day, and by each succeeding generation. As we are seeing now, all the victories we have won over the years can be lost in an instant if we are not vigilant.

The fate of humanity on our frail planet is now in the balance. There is nothing more important for us to teach — and students to learn — on our campuses today than the art of negotiation and compromise, wherein people agree to disagree, where students learn to listen carefully, and all respect the opinions of others.

In the end, supporting educational access for Latinos, or studying and celebrating Latino culture, is not about personal economics or the solidarity of our community. It is about protecting our social order and the American democracy.

If that doesn't inspire you to continue your work, I do not know what else can.

So thank you again for inviting me to speak today. Good luck in your own endeavors. And God Bless!