CLEBRATING Latinx HERITAGE MONTH
Celebrate Latinx Heritage Month

Latinx heritage month is an opportunity to celebrate the many contributions, rich and diverse cultures, and histories Latinxs bring to the United States and our communities. This month Somos Latinx Líderes (SoLL), our Latinx affinity group at Feinberg School of Medicine wants to celebrate Latinx Heritage month by highlighting some Latinx faculty, students, and staff at our university and in Chicago. At Feinberg, SoLL aims to create an inclusive environment year-round through the following goals:

Goal 1: Host monthly events for Latinx FSM Staff.

Goal 2: Create networking opportunities through events that are of interest to Latinx staff at FSM.

Goal 3: Collaborate with other affinity groups across Northwestern University to host events.

In the past SoLL has partnered with the Spanish department to host trivia nights. This was an opportunity for members to practice their Spanish skills, hang out (virtually) with other Latinxs at Northwestern, and win gift cards! SoLL is also active in community partnerships. They have partnered with Northwestern Medicine to host a panel with current MSS, IPHAM, and ISGMH staff for underrepresented minority high school students interested in careers in medicine. Most recently, SoLL has partnered with Chicago Education Cooperative to create a mentorship program designed to help students navigate higher education.

If you are interested in joining SoLL reach out to Andrés at andres.avila@northwestern.edu

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¡Hola! Soy María Teresa Villanueva. I was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco México and although I cannot claim that I was raised there, I can say that it is part of my identity. Another aspect of my identity is the United States. Since I was one year old, I grew up in the lower west side of Chicago, in a neighborhood called Pilsen, a very popular and trendy place to live now due to its richness in Mexican art, music, and culinary tradition. However, I can attest that it wasn’t as cool or safe about 25 or so years ago, when I was a child and teenager. However, in spite of the economic and social hardships I faced in my neighborhood and as a first-generation college student, I embarked and succeeded in the journey of higher education. I earned a B.A. and M.A. in Spanish Literature from Loyola University Chicago. All of my achievements were possible because my parents, family, and community believed in, encouraged, and supported me.

Currently, I am an Associate Professor of Instruction in Spanish at Northwestern University. The classes I teach at NU include elementary, intermediate, and advanced courses designed for second language (L2) learners and Spanish heritage language (SHL) learners. I have taught courses at WCAS, SPS, and Feinberg School of Medicine.

Through my coursework at Loyola and my community involvement in Pilsen (catechist in my teens, youth group minister in my early twenties at my church, and community organizer in my mid-twenties at a non-for-profit-organization, etc.), I learned more about and came to appreciate more my own Latinx language, culture, and heritage which in turn, led me to understand and accept to a greater degree some of the differences between the two cultures in which I had lived in as a Mexican-American. I mention my own personal trajectory because, in essence, it explains the reason why I teach language and culture so passionately, not only because I share with each student the nuances of the Spanish language and Latinx culture, but also because I have the opportunity to demystify the stereotypes and barriers of language and racial discrimination and/or prejudice against Latinxs that I have seen and experienced through my own family and community.

Another aspect of my teaching that I fully enjoy is encouraging and supporting Latinx students outside of class. With the support of the Spanish and Portuguese Department, I co-created and co-founded an extracurricular activity for SHL learners called Tacita de Café. For every event organized, we bring together SHL learners from Northwestern University to celebrate and appreciate their heritage culture all while speaking Spanish in an informal setting. It also serves as a platform to connect and build a community of acceptance and support among NU Latinx students.

My advice to other Latinx students is to be resilient and altruistic. We all have our unique journeys, nevertheless, many of the struggles we face as Latinx in academia are similar. That means that you are not alone; so keep moving forward and surround yourself with like-minded people. Also, as you accomplish your academic goals and become successful, always pay it forward by helping and supporting your Latinx peers as well as the next generation of Latinx students.
Latinx Student Spotlight – Eloisa Serano

Eloisa Serano is a second-year PhD student in Clinical Psychology at NU. Her lab, the Griffith Lab, is housed within the MSS family. As a Southside Chicago native and alumni of DePaul University, she had exposure to the many health inequities and social justice issues affecting urban areas like Chicago. It was through her coursework in Sociology, her work with at-risk youth and survivors of trafficking, and one-on-one work with research participants in General Internal Medicine (GIM) and MSS that she realized the importance of clinical therapy, research, and program innovation for minority and underrepresented populations. This led her to switch gears into the world of Clinical Psychology in order to receive training as a clinical therapist and gain more understanding of cognitive function. As a bilingual student, she uses language as an additional tool to connect with patients and to help bridge the gap between resources and Latinx communities throughout Chicago. She realized that as a Latina clinician and researcher, she will have the opportunity to include more people in the shaping of research and use clinical therapy to address mental health needs of Latinx populations. Her goal is to help break down the cultural stigma of seeking mental health support and break down generational cycles of trauma.

Her lab research focuses on health literacy, assessment, treatment of anxiety and depression, and community mental health care. Along with her current research, she is also interested in intergenerational trauma, issues affecting first-generation students, women’s issues, correctional health, and community violence.

*Her tips for young professionals (particularly, BIPOC) would be to remember that there is a place for them in academia no matter how hard the process may feel.* She recommends not being afraid to reach out to as many people as possible in their field of choice in order to learn from their experiences and make helpful connections. When she’s not in the lab, Eloisa spends her time cooking, trying delicious coffee throughout the city (hello, cold brew & café de olla), watching American crime shows, and buying too many treats for her family pup, Reesie.
Latinx Staff Spotlight – Manuel Hurtado Jr.

Manuel Hurtado, Jr., is a research study coordinator at the Institute for Sexual and Gender Minority Health and Wellbeing. He works across two projects at ISGMH, the SMART project and KIU! project. He is also a part-time graduate student in Northwestern’s M.S. in Data Science program. However, his bachelor’s degree is a B.A. in Psychology with an emphasis in neuroscience from Marquette University. He is originally from Dallas, Texas, but he grew up in Milwaukee, WI, for most of his life.

Are there specific events/influences that drove your interests into your focus of study (internships, volunteer work, personal experiences, mentorship from a professor/employer, etc.)?
I have enjoyed math for as long as I can remember. I can still remember how my 8th grade algebra teacher, Mrs. Bender, made learning enjoyable through activities and the way in which she explained algebra. Later, as an undergraduate student taking a ‘Psychological Statistics and Measurements’ course, I knew I enjoyed working with numbers and could see myself pursuing a data-focused career. After completing that course, I got involved in psychological research labs and grew an affinity towards LGBT health research. Although I’m not certain about the career path I want to follow after my master’s degree, I do know that I enjoy being a lifelong learner and particularly enjoy applied statistics.
Also in my experience, a supportive faculty mentor or supervisor will go a long way. Mentoring usually does not come naturally, it is learned, and I have been blessed to work with supportive people that have put in the time to teach me new skills and life lessons.

Throughout your professional journey, from undergraduate to your current position, what were some things you found supportive or lacking in navigating through higher education? (i.e., support systems, affinity, or other university groups, etc.)
As far as navigating higher education goes, it can feel defeating to navigate those channels if that was not a skill that was worked on as an undergraduate student. University groups are certainly a tool that can assist in navigating higher education – I definitely recommend joining university/professional organizations of like-minded individuals.

What advice would you give aspiring professionals seeking graduate programs, specifically BIPOC aspiring professionals?
You should create a list of goals. Start with a long-term goal (within the next 3-5 years), and then think of short-term goals that will help you get there. Think of short-term goals as steps to achieving your long-term goal. Yes, your long-term may change, and likely will, but that does not mean that your short-term goals have gone to waste. Short-term goals should be investments in yourself; they should be skills or experiences that can be directly translated into your career. Self-regulation is your best friend, and when life feels bleak just remember que sí se puede (remember that you can do it) y juntos seguiremos pa’delante (and we’ll continue forging on together).

Is there anything else that was not asked, but you feel is relevant and important for us to know?
It is important to recognize when you need help, how to ask for help, and where to get help – everyone needs help. It also took a village to get you to where you are today and remember to give back to your community.
Latinx Staff Spotlight – Andrés Alvarado Avila

Andrés Alvarado Avila is a research study coordinator at the Institute for Sexual and Gender Minority Health and Wellbeing. He works on the SMART project, an online intervention designed to reduce risk of HIV and STIs in adolescents. He holds a bachelor’s degree in applied psychology from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His two undergraduate theses focused on exploring access to mental healthcare in minoritized populations and disparities in obesity and depression in Latinxs.

Are there specific events/influences that drove your interests into your focus of study (internships, volunteer work, personal experiences, mentorship from a professor/employer, etc.)?
I vividly remember my perspective on health disparities completely changed when my abnormal psychology professor discussed statistics pertaining to access to mental health care in Black and Latinx communities. Learning about the micro and macro level determinants of who accessed healthcare and how it produced health disparities within my own communities encouraged me to study this topic. After college I started working for SMART, a project focused on studying racially diverse gay, bisexual, and queer adolescents assigned male at birth. This project has helped me understand how individuals with multiple minoritized identities (i.e., being gay and Black) are at further risk for mental and physical health problems. My goal is to continue my education at the doctoral level so I can pursue independent research to address health disparities in minoritized communities.

Throughout your professional journey, from undergraduate to your current position, what were some things you found supportive or lacking in navigating through higher education? (i.e., support systems, affinity, or other university groups, etc.)
My undergraduate mentor, Dr. Lisa Sanchez-Johnsen, was instrumental in helping me navigate higher education as someone who wanted to pursue graduate school. As a first-generation college student, I was the first in my family to walk a path no one else in my family had walked. This led to many questions few people in my social network could answer. Dr. Sanchez-Johnsen was there to provide guidance.

What advice would you give aspiring professionals seeking graduate programs, specifically BIPOC aspiring professionals?
Create connections! Networking in college and in your professional career is crucial to success in finding a placement in a graduate program. Don’t be afraid to reach out to individuals and ask them to chat about their work. In my experience, most people are more than happy to chat with you.

Is there anything else that was not asked, but you feel is relevant and important for us to know?
Share the wealth of wisdom with your community! As a student in higher education or professional in academia you have acquired an immense amount of knowledge about navigating higher education. Share this knowledge with others in your community so they can get to where you are.
My name is Carlos Rosas, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Community and Prevention Research program in the department of Psychology and a T32 predoctoral fellow at the Institute for Minority Health Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

What events/influences drove your interests into your focus of study?
Briefly, my research interests focus on the psychosocial determinants of health among Latinxs. During my time as an undergraduate and master-level graduate student, I conducted research on the association between discrimination and psychological well-being among Latinx adults and college students in California and Chicago, respectively. More recently, my research has focused on the association between depressive and anxiety symptoms and hypertension incidence among Latinxs using data from the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos (HCHS/SOL), the largest, prospective epidemiological study of Latinx adults in the U.S.

I was first inspired to conduct research to improve the health—and ultimately, the lives—of Latinxs when I met a history professor at a community college in California. One day during a lecture, he said that many Latinxs have the desire to escalate the socioeconomic (SES) ladder, but on their way up, they forget their community, and so he encouraged us to be different, to use our careers and knowledge to help our community. This resonated with me as I was already volunteering in non-profit organizations that provided support to undocumented immigrants in my community. However, I took that sense of responsibility and I applied it to what was already becoming my passion: Psychology. As I learned more about the field of psychology, I thought of ways in which I could leverage its tools to contribute to improving the lives of Latinxs, my community. From there, it was obvious to me that I should focus on health as I saw the deleterious effects of illness—both mental and physical—on the overall quality of life of my own family members.

What has helped you navigate higher education?
Throughout my professional journey, my greatest source of support has been my family. They were and still are my source of inspiration and determination. Mentors also played an extremely significant role in my journey. Mentors in every step, but my undergraduate mentor in particular, were vital. They really taught me everything. As an immigrant and first-generation college student, I had little knowledge of higher education. I did not know about all the support programs available for students from disadvantaged background; I didn’t even know what a PhD was, and I certainly did not believe something like that was within my reach. They not only showed me all the different opportunities and supported my applications to fellowships and programs, but they also made me believe in myself.

Finally, support programs, such as NIH-funded training fellowships, and student-centered conferences were very important in my trajectory. Before joining the NIH-funded Maximizing Access to Research Careers (MARC) program at my undergraduate university, for example, I was working full-time at a factory, and the MARC support allowed me to focus solely on my classes and research. Financial support, while important, is only one of the many benefits that such programs provide. Without federal training programs, such as MARC and my current T32 fellowship, I would not be on my way to a PhD.

What advice would you give to others navigating higher education?
Don’t be afraid to ask questions, to talk to your professors, and to inquire about opportunities. I spent too many years as an undergraduate because I never asked questions. I never sought advised from anyone. The more questions you ask, the more people you talk to, the more inform you will be. Opportunities will open. Reach out to potential mentors.

Apply. Apply to fellowships, apply to scholarships, apply to your dream graduate program. Over the years, I’ve learned that assuming one will not qualify for something prior to applying is a big mistake. I never imagined I would win the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, but I knew I had to apply to find out.

Don’t be afraid of the unknown. Everything is learned along the way. Some life prospects, some roles, some projects seem unreachable or even unrealistic at first look. Don’t be afraid to take it on. Even when you don’t know something well enough, skills are learned through experience. Don’t limit yourself.
Announcement board

We want to highlight more work of Latinx faculty and students in higher education. If you know someone that may be interested, please let us know so we can highlight their work! You can submit your nominations here: https://forms.gle/LXaeTlXemNLM8MmT8

Want to share your family’s favorite Hispanic/Latinx food recipe? Share them with us so we can share them in our newsletter: https://forms.gle/zXrQXoz962Xk4YA8A