LATINO LEADERSHIP IN THE NUEVO SOUTH: BUILDING NEW DESTINATION COMMUNITIES

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THE PROJECT

- To explore the migration and settlement experience of Latino immigrants in New Destination communities of the southeast.
- To examine this experience through the point of view of the life history of Latino community leaders.
- Fifteen community leader were interviewed.
- Funded by the North Carolina Humanities Council, 2009-2011.
EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA
THE PARTICIPANTS

- Honduras (Olancho, Tegucilapa)
- Mexico (Veracruz, Oaxaca, Guanajuato, Nayarit, Hidalgo)
- Chile (Concepción)
- Puerto Rico (Coamo)
- Colombia (Bogota)

- Community organizers
- Entrepreneurs
- A religious leader
- An advocate of women’s rights

- Six women
- Eight men
THE THESIS

- Given a context of economic, political, and cultural barriers and limitations, the settlement of Latinos in New Destination communities of the southeast is facilitated by the action of grassroots leaders.

- Leaders proactively create the conditions to facilitate the integration of Latinos to institutions of larger society (e.g., education and health) but at the same time they play a critical role in strengthening the community from the inside.

- Although not the only ones, grassroots leaders in New Destination communities are facilitating a process of “mutual accommodation” characterized by building a sense of “cultural citizenship” in the community.

- The study of settlement processes in New Destination communities has to examine not only the role of institutions of larger society in “integrating” Latinos, but also the key role played by these leaders in “pushing” the boundaries and creating spaces for social participation and cultural expression.
THE CONTEXT

- Generally, grassroots organizations are weak, lack access to stable sources of funding, rely heavily on the charisma and personality of leaders, and are highly dependent on voluntarism.

- Generally, leaders themselves are in precarious economic situations, struggling for their livelihoods and to support their organizations.

- Local communities relate to Latinos as workers (mostly agricultural and food processing). Thus, there is a lack of a holistic understanding of the social and cultural complexity that is inherent to this population. This is reflected in institutions not being fully prepared to provide culturally competent services to the Latino community. [Important role to be played by universities].

- There is fear in the Latino community because of the anti-immigration political environment.
THE MODEL

Facilitate integration

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Strengthen community from the inside

Community building and settlement
Leaders promote (and negotiate) the acceptance of the immigrant community by placing important issues/problems in the public domain.

Leaders socialize institutions of larger society about the Latino community. [Teach about who we are].

Leaders negotiate access to resources for the community. [More access to culturally appropriate resources].

Leaders provide individual support to immigrants as they navigate the system.

Leaders create the spaces for immigrants to celebrate their identity and culture.
FACILITATE INTEGRATION
Well, at the beginning, when I start dealing with the Hispanic population, we have some issues in health. They try to get into the clinics, and because of the situation that they are, they cannot receive the proper care for their families. So, we try to get involved, having meetings with the agencies, so now the agencies are coming. We organized our center here, so they come to the center and they provide those services for free here.

And they [schools] have PTA’s, Spanish PTA’s that they did not have before. So, it is another goal that we have accomplished. We went to each school, so we went to each school and requested that...
CELEBRATE IDENTITY AND CULTURE

- Festivals
- Forums
- Health fairs
- Tiendas
- Leadership development
IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

- We want to develop new leadership, in specific the young, youth guys. I need to go out, and try to help as much as I can, because that is going to be the difference between now and what's going to happen happen in five, six years down the road. So, I need everybody to get involved...

- As an organization, we started to work in specific projects. For instance, we wanted to promote our culture, so we started with the “Festival de la Raza”. We also created programs to develop leadership and programs in education...

- So, we started to promote our culture. We organized cultural events in different areas on the county, promoting our culture. We invited dance groups from salvadoreños, guatemaltecos, mexicanos... By doing this, we were letting the people in the county know that we are a rich community in terms of culture, that there is difference within our community” [e.g., salvadoreños, guatemaltecos, mexicanos].
CONCLUSIONS

The role that Latino grassroots community leaders play in facilitating this process of “mutual accommodation” needs to be understood as being part of a larger process in which other actors (e.g., Latinos going through their day-to-day activities) also ‘push’ and break boundaries.

Future research will look at different ways in which these community leaders articulate and partner with players and institutions from larger society and how this combined effort is represented in building a sense of cultural citizenship for Latinos in New Destination communities.

There is an important role for universities to play in support of grassroots organizations and their leaders. The notion of “engaged university” is in fashion, but we propose an emphasis on partnering with and supporting the grassroots movement in particular.
SELECTED REFERENCES

