



Educator Q&A

Leading the Transformation: Working With Latinx Communities

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Why should we care about increasing the number of Latinx social workers?

Let me start with a qualifier. The term Latinx, or Latino/a, or even Hispanic, is socially constructed. There is not a unique understanding of who is Latinx, as there is not a single Latinx community. There is evidence that Latinx clients, especially first-generation Latinxs with languages other than English, benefit from having Latinx social workers who are able to communicate with them in their native language. By benefit I mean that they experience better quality of care, which translates to longer adherence to treatment and better outcomes for the clients and for their communities.

What works to increase the number of Latinx social workers?

I can only speak to my experience with the Latinx Leadership Initiative (LLI) and a model that attempts to increase the number of social workers who speak Spanish—which implies something beyond language. It is important to remember that not all Latinxs in the United States speak Spanish. To increase the number of Latinx social workers, teaching in Spanish is key—this is the first element of the LLI model. People often think that in the LLI we teach in Spanish because our students do not speak English. Nothing is further from reality. Most of my students are native English speakers who grew up in Spanish-speaking households. In fact, I'm often the only one in the LLI who speaks English with a heavy Spanish accent. Teaching in Spanish is essential because it switches the cultural understanding of the learning space. Students' shared experiences are validated in the classroom. They don't have to leave a part of who they are outside to be able to enter the academic setting. Students are not only valued for who they are, but their stories, cultures, lived experiences, traditions, families, are celebrated. I was teaching in Spanish one day, and one of my students spontaneously said, "Wait, this must be how the majority feels in the classroom." It was the first time that she felt like she fully belonged in an academic setting and the first time that she was not the only Latina in a classroom. The first time that she could fully share who she was, without having to constantly auto-censor herself to fit cultural standards that were not her own.

This was a crucial moment for me. I realized how by teaching in Spanish a door to a shared cultural experience was opened for my students. A door that allowed them to enter the academic space without having to give anything up to conform to cultural standards that were not their own. This also facilitated the second element of the LLI model, the creation of a cohort model: a way of navigating academia in which students support each other. By taking classes in Spanish together they form a tight-knit community. They help each other both inside and outside the classroom. They navigate assignments together, readings, exams, and academia itself while juggling work and family obligations. At the risk of sounding cheesy, they become a family.



A third element of the LLI model that is important to consider is mentorship, which students get from faculty, advisors, and supervisors. All students are assigned one mentor with whom they check in on a regular basis. The fact that these mentors are assigned even before they start the program is important. We try to assign Latinx mentors who speak Spanish and have gone through similar experiences as our students. This also goes for field education. We have over 130 alumni all over the country working as social work professionals who now serve as advisors and supervisors to our students in their agencies. Having professional Latinx social workers as supervisors of Latinx students in social work agencies makes a big difference in the training of our Latinx future social work professionals. These supervisors understand the intricacies of working in two languages, and the complexities of understanding clients who are often immersed in complex situations for which the traditional social work system may not be prepared. They also understand that, for example, having “a client” may not be the best course of action when they need an intervention focused on a family as the unit rather than on the individual. All these complexities are easier to navigate when the student has a supervisor who understands them on a daily basis: perhaps the student is the only Latinx social worker in the agency, with all that this implies—larger caseloads, more complex caseloads, having to deal with a system that focuses on individuals, not on communities, and so on.

What is a key component in preparing future professionals to work with Latinx communities?

The key component is that there are no recipes. Latinx communities are extremely diverse and unique. However, if I had to focus on something, it would be on the strengths of Latinx communities. Despite all the discrimination, rejection, and systemic barriers, Latinxs have been thriving for centuries in the United States. That is what the evidence shows. In preparing future professional social workers to work with Latinx communities, I would focus on these strengths. I’d switch from a deficit-based perspective of how Latinxs don’t fit normative standards to one that shows what has made them thrive despite all the systemic obstacles that they have had to face. What you will discover are shared experiences characterized by innovation, resilience, leadership, faith, and community. Draw from that common experience to understand what is unique in the community or the client you are working with. Accompany that client or community in their journey from that experience, walk alongside them using those assets as the guides, and that will allow them to keep advancing their journey.

About the Educator



[Dr. Rocío Calvo](#) is associate professor and founding director of the [Latinx Leadership Initiative](#) (LLI) at the Boston College School of Social Work. The LLI has been recognized as one of the [2019 Examples of Excelencia](#). Dr. Calvo is the recipient of the [2019 CSWE Distinguished Recent Contributions to Social Work Education Award](#). A leading scholar in the field of immigration and social welfare, Dr. Calvo’s research focuses on the mechanisms that immigrants use to navigate different systems of social protection in receiving countries. Dr. Calvo’s research has been supported by the Spencer Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation.