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Steans Center Newsletter

Steans Center

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Intercambio: Language Exchange Program Offers Unique Service Learning Model

The program engages DePaul intermediate Spanish language students with Spanish-speaking ESL (English as a Second Language) students in order to exchange conversation in English and Spanish while learning about critical social issues.

DePaul senior Barbara Obregon is a mentor for Intercambio, a language exchange program formed through a partnership between the Steans Center, DePaul’s Department of Modern Languages and community-based organizations in Chicago. In its 9th year at DePaul, Intercambio is as much about improving language skills as it is a cultural exchange that exposes participants from DePaul and the community to the differences and commonalities in each other’s lives. Obregon and many others familiar with the program say that the program brings people from diverse backgrounds together in a unique fashion. “Intercambio is not only about language development – we see relationships forged in this program,” she says. “It feels like we are building a community.” The program, she adds, has been influenced by popular education theories developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire that stress collective learning and empowerment of community members. As they practice their language skills, participants critically reflect on important social justice issues occurring every day in Chicago and globally.

The origins of Intercambio date back to a grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) awarded to the Steans Center in 2001. The program entails DePaul’s Modern Languages Department offering an intermediate level, year-long sequence of Spanish classes with a service learning component. Students fulfill the university’s Junior Year Experiential Learning requirement which requires that students draw connections between course content and experiences off-campus.

Obregon, who is majoring in accounting and finance, facilitates the program weekly at Refugee & Immigrant Community Services (RICS) in the Belmont-Cragin neighborhood on the city’s northwest side. RICS is part of Heartland Human Care Services, a subsidiary of Heartland Alliance.

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McCormick Intern Gets the Word Out About Domestic Violence

BY DAN BARON

"In America, 15.5 million children live in domestically violent homes," states a public service announcement (PSA). "Call CAWC's 24-hour hotline today to start a new life for you and your child."

This PSA was created by DePaul student Meisha Thigpen, a St. Louis native who is a senior in marketing with an advertising and public relations minor. Thigpen created the announcement while interning with the Chicago-based nonprofit organization Connections for Abused Women and their Children (CAWC). As a McCormick Community Intern, she is one of a select group of juniors and seniors who have exhibited a strong commitment to community action, service and academic excellence. At the end of the academic year, Thigpen and her peers will present their internship projects at Service Speaks, an annual DePaul conference that highlights the service-related work of students, faculty and partners.

“The great thing about the McCormick Internship is that students work closely with community partners to design a project that will assist the organization,” adds Johnny LaSalle, Community Internship Coordinator at the Steans Center. “At the same time, students develop specific skills.” Participants intern for one quarter (at least 100 hours of service) with organizations, though they can reapply for a second and third consecutive quarter with the same organization. A key component of the program, LaSalle says, is the reflection sessions during which time interns are encouraged to explore their experience with each other and in relationship to professional development opportunities.

Thigpen, who is a resident advisor at DePaul, has a strong record of service at the university. Her background includes participation in the university’s Service Immersion Programs (hosted by DePaul Community Service Association), an experience that engaged her in service-related activities at an Apache reservation in Arizona, a rural community in Kentucky and in El Salvador. She also participated in a group called Sisters Together Recognizing Our Never-Ending Growth (STRONG), an organization that unites women of color. During a group discussion about domestic violence, members made cards for women in a shelter operated by CAWC, which provides shelter, legal assistance and counseling services. This experience, Thigpen says, was important because it helped lead to her marketing and public relations internship with the organization. “When I first started to learn about this organization, we went to their shelter. I really fell in love with what they are doing,” says Thigpen. “It’s important to me to work on women’s issues and empower women to realize that they have an equal say and rights.”

As part of her internship, Thigpen created Facebook and Twitter pages for CAWC as well as a brochure for the organization’s fundraiser. For the PSA, she not only wrote the script but pulled together a range of people and organizations to make it happen – including a production agency, an animator and a child actor. She also distributed the PSA to local radio and television sources. “I take it one step at a time,” says Thigpen, who has experience doing marketing for nonprofits but had never created a PSA before the internship. “If I don’t know how to do something, I look it up or ask. That’s what’s cool about working for this nonprofit – they give you so much creative freedom.” As a result of her experience, Thigpen strongly recommends the internship to her peers at DePaul. “You get to do what you are most passionate about. It’s a great program.”

Anne Borg, development director at CAWC, says that “the timing was perfect” for Thigpen to work with the organization. “We had created a strategic plan, and it included significant focus on communications,” she says of a process that included rebranding and renaming of the organization before Thigpen started at CAWC. She noted that her organization, like many nonprofits, did not have the resources for many projects. “We have been limited in this area – and what we really needed was people power.”

According to Borg, the organization realized it “needed to become more technologically savvy in terms of how people communicate with each other. Meisha had a real understanding in that area.” Borg has been working in the domestic violence field since the 1970’s and points to the growing need to communicate key messages about domestic violence to key audiences. “We need to reach donors and prospective donors, other service providers, the general public and – most of all – families impacted by domestic violence,” she asserts. “Having Meisha here has made a difference to our organization – she really added to our team and helped us meet an important goal. It’s critical that people know there are resources in the community that can help women and children.”
DIRECTOR’S LETTER

In the 2010 census, 34 million people living in the U.S. were identified as Spanish speaking. Since 2000, the number of Latinos increased by 43% to 16.3% of the population. Today, more than 34 million Spanish-speakers live in the United States; the Spanish-speaking population experienced the largest growth among people who speak a language other than English. Chicago’s Latino population expanded by 3% since 2000, while the white and African American populations declined. In some suburban counties the increase over the decade grew more than 140%. There is no denying that the Chicago metropolitan area is now a multilingual metropolis with Spanish as the dominant language spoken other than English.

This edition of the Steans Center quarterly newsletter offers a window into one of our most successful service learning programs during the almost 13 years since DePaul initiated its academic service learning program. Intercambio (exchange) offers intermediate level Spanish language students the opportunity to participate in a program geared toward improving their Spanish language skills while assisting Spanish-speaking community residents in developing their English conversation skills. The program has its origins in an idea developed as part of a FIPSE grant in 2001 by my predecessor, Dr. Laurie Worrall (Executive Director, New York State Campus Compact), and the program’s first coordinator Edgar Ramirez (Associate Executive Director Chicago Commons). Alongside them both were a number of critical faculty members from the Department of Modern Languages (Dr. Jacqueline Lazu, Dr. Susana Martinez) who developed curriculum, piloted it, and refined it over the years to the point that it is now an exemplary model for service learning at DePaul. Today, under the leadership of our Associate Director Marisol Morales, Intercambio has flourished to become the program we consistently refer to when we are looking at the most successful practice of service learning at DePaul.

As you will read, Intercambio is not just about language acquisition. It is about a form of reciprocal engagement (exchange) that guides students and community members toward forming relationships that not only highlight cultural differences, but expose commonalities at the core of humanity. Central to this approach is raising awareness about the social realities facing Latino communities in the United States and the collective responsibility of ensuring justice and equality for those marginalized by systems of oppression. Intercambio symbolizes the power of service learning to educate across boundaries in ways that encourage students and community members to think about how policies, including those focused on immigration, impact different communities. Most importantly, the program illustrates how the power to change policies begins with respectful dialogue on critical issues. Intercambio therefore symbolizes one of the central goals of a DePaul education: the honoring of human dignity.
The Intercambio program also operates at Erie Neighborhood House, Centro Romero, and Universidad Popular, all organizations that serve predominantly Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants. At RICS, Obregon says, many community members are from Mexico, though there are participants from Colombia, Peru and other Central and South American countries. The ESL students may lack confidence in their grasp of English, Obregon says, but they typically have a greater grasp of the language than DePaul students do of Spanish. “Because relationships are formed,” she says, “you are able to get past preconceptions and prejudices, and have a dialogue.”

Rebecca Martinez, former Academic and Community Development Coordinator at the Steans Center, supervised the Intercambio program. She says that Intercambio students have an opportunity to enhance their language skills while exploring complex social issues related to classism, racism, ableism and other forms of oppression. “We ease into issues,” Martinez says. “As soon as people feel comfortable about it, we talk about specific topics that affect our community and our world. We try to create a comfortable space – a space in which we can have a dialogue.” According to Martinez, the success of the program is reflected by more and more students choosing to participate in Intercambio for the full three-course sequence.

Ben Dronfield, Manager of Adult Education at RICS, calls the organization’s partnership with the Steans Center a “mutually beneficial relationship.” Dronfield states that the Intercambio program typically serves about six community residents per quarter at RICS and DePaul students team up with community members on a one-on-one basis.

“The program provides our students with a rare opportunity – the chance to speak English conversationally in a learning environment,” he says. Like many people involved with the program, Dronfield stressed that Intercambio creates a supportive place for DePaul students and community members to learn. “Intercambio removes any sense that there is a downside to making mistakes in the classroom,” he notes. “In some situations, community members may be concerned about making mistakes in a class when learning a language – but that’s not the case in this program.”

The same is true for DePaul students, says junior Kyra Cameron. She suggests that “what you can take from Intercambio is that a lot of times in the classroom you get really shy when speaking Spanish and caught up. You ask: Am I answering this correctly? In Intercambio, you loosen up a bit. If you make a mistake, it’s OK.” She says that her Spanish professor last spring, Bernardo Navia was very supportive of the program. Navia says that students in the program “really feel they have learned – not only by studying books, but by talking with people in real life.” Cameron participated in the Intercambio program as a service learner at RICS last year. Last fall, as a psychology major who minors in Spanish and community service, she also volunteered for the program. She further notes that “people in the community who participated in the program taught you something, whether it was a new word, something about their culture or even a recipe for guacamole. It was a great atmosphere for learning, and I became friends with many community members.”

Erica Woodson, a senior majoring in international studies who participated at RICS last fall, says that initially she just “wanted to keep talking Spanish” after spending her junior year abroad in Argentina (and previously studying abroad in Puerto Rico). She claims that the Intercambio program reinforced the dynamic quality of Latino communities in Chicago. “People sometimes view the Latino community as being homogeneous,” she says, “but you really meet a range of people and hear different views through this program.” Woodson adds that “immersion is the best way for me to learn a language – and in an environment where everyone is learning. A program like this makes so much sense, and could work on a national level. In Intercambio, you are giving something and receiving something.”

Dr. Jacqueline Lazú, one of the original faculty members involved in the FIPSE grant and who continues to teach courses linked to Intercambio, speaks of the transformation that is possible when students learn language in the classroom and in the community. She says that even in one quarter “I have seen a transformation among students in terms of their confidence level. They are acquiring a level of proficiency, but there is also more to it – students learn that language cannot be learned in a vacuum. It’s important to understand the norms of the culture.” Lazú says that language development is especially crucial as DePaul students – and community members served by the program – learn how to disagree with each other. “Early on, students don’t have tools to frame a counter-argument,” says Lazú,
who is also Director of the Community Service Studies Minor at the Steans Center and Associate Professor of Modern Languages. “They may disagree but they can’t communicate what they want to say. By engaging in conversation, students learn how to do that.” She adds that a textbook used for the class complemented the methodology used in Intercambio. The textbook employs exercises that include reference to social issues that can be discussed by students and community residents.

The educational impact of Intercambio over the past decade is reflected in years of positive program evaluations and numerous stories relayed by Spanish language faculty and Steans Center mentors. Like all service learning courses, the program is also assessed quarterly through quantitative and qualitative evaluations attained from students, faculty and community partners.

Until recently, less was known about the perspective of community members. In 2009, however, based on interviews with Intercambio community participants, Dr. Lucia d’Arlach (Mt. Sinai Hospital), Dr. Bernadette Sanchez (DePaul) and Rachel Feuer (DePaul) published “Voices of the Community: A Case for Reciprocity in Service Learning” in the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (Fall 2009). The authors note how community members reported “changing views of themselves (i.e., from feeling helpless to finding a voice), as well as changing views of social issues (i.e., from impossible to solvable).” Findings such as those above continue to be a part of Intercambio’s success in the community. Recent participant Felix Delgado, who came to the United States from Mexico twelve years ago, works in the computer technology field for a company in Des Plaines, IL.

He learned about Intercambio from a cousin who participates in the program. “My English has improved a lot,” says Delgado, who lives in the Belmont-Cragin community and has participated in the program for two years. “Students at DePaul are very good at helping us with pronunciation and new words.” Delgado adds that the program offers him the chance to learn language skills through conversations about a variety of subjects. “Every class is something different. We not only have casual conversations, but we also talk about things that are helpful to know or learn more about – like discrimination, global warming or education, or problems in the community. We also learn about the culture of other people – what are their customs, what they do. I’m learning a lot, and it’s fun.”

Elvia Zagal, who lives in the Portage Park community on Chicago’s North Side and works in a hotel in downtown Chicago, has also been involved in Intercambio for two years. She emphasizes that Intercambio is not just about what happens one night a week at RICS. “At the end of one quarter we continued to share our culture and learn about other cultures. We went to different restaurants in the city with DePaul students – including Mexican, Colombian and Chinese restaurants. We also talk on Facebook, and in emails,” says Zagal, who has two teenage children. “We are comfortable with each other – everybody knows everybody. I don’t have to speak perfect English, and they don’t have to speak perfect Spanish. She offers a concise view of how, and why, DePaul students and community members form a bond and benefit from this program – a view that many at DePaul have shared. “They ask us, and we ask them,” she says. “We learn together.”

“Because relationships are formed, you are able to get past preconceptions and prejudices, and have a dialogue.”

- Barbara Obregon, DePaul Senior and Intercambio Mentor.
OPPORTUNITIES

McCormick Community Internships | Fall 2011 internships. Deadline May 20th, 2011
DePaul juniors and seniors from any major, design and propose an internship that applies knowledge and skills to benefit a community organization, while simultaneously gaining valuable work experience. Renewable for up to three terms.

Community Partners Internships (CPI) | Recruiting now
DePaul students with federal work study eligibility, apply for one of several CPI internships that offer the opportunity to gain work experience that combines professional development and community involvement. More information at steans.depaul.edu.

Fourth Annual Service Speaks Conference 2011 | May 13, 2011. SAVE THE DATE
DePaul students, faculty and community partners present on their service and social justice experiences. Participate in a day-long conference featuring panels, presentations, workshops and posters that reflect the impact of university-community engagement on critical social issues in Chicago and internationally.

2011 International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement Annual Conference (IARSLCE) | November 2-4, 2011. SAVE THE DATE
The IARSLCE will take place in Chicago at the Palmer House Hilton from November 2nd through November 4th, 2011. The Conference is hosted by Illinois Campus Compact (ILCC) with five co-hosting institutions: DePaul University (DPU), Loyola University of Chicago (LUC), National Louis University (NLU), Columbia College Chicago (CCC), and Northern Illinois University (NIU). More information at researchslce.org.