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Professional Training Fellowship Final Report

For the length of my professional training fellowship, I worked with a new Michigan-based Latina/o advocacy nonprofit called Latinx<sup>1</sup> Leaders for the Enhancement of Advocacy and Development (LLEAD). From August to December of 2017, I worked directly with the president, the state board, and Lansing chapter board members, as well as with many rank-and-file members and non-members. As a new organization, LLEAD has many competing priorities, including obtaining 501(c)3 status, expanding its number of local chapters, and carrying out strategic planning. It quickly became clear, though, that my graduate study skills of critical thinking and project development and my research background in Latinx studies and gender and sexuality could be best used for one specific project.

In 2016, LLEAD received a Gerald Beckwith Constitutional Liberties ACLU grant to devise and implement a statewide “Crisis Response System” (CRS) for anti-Latinx hate crimes and bias incidents in the state of Michigan. This system is meant to address three problems: the lack of data on anti-Latinx hate crimes and bias incidents; the chronic underreporting of Latinx hate crimes and bias incidents, especially due to language barriers and frequent collaboration between local law enforcement agencies and ICE; and the rise of such hate crimes and bias incidents since the 2016 election. I was tasked with helping to create a Crisis Response System manual which would teach a statewide network of local volunteers how to respond to such crises and preparing a Crisis Response System training conference which would formally begin this teaching process.

I met weekly with the state president and a committee of three and coordinated every part of the process, from initial brainstorming, to planning, writing, organizing, and formatting the manual as well as long-term strategic thinking on the implementation of the Crisis Response System. During a typical meeting, I brought my laptop and a basic agenda or set of questions about the many, many decisions that needed to be made, all the way from the micro level -- what should the manual’s color scheme be? -- to the medium level -- should the section on victim response go after, or before, the “in case of ICE” section? -- and finally to the macro level -- how will migrant farm workers in Richmond, Michigan hear about and access our support network?

The most helpful asset I was able to bring to the team was an ability to simultaneously anticipate and prioritize important details while also maintaining a bird’s-eye view of what needed to get done to move the manual and training to completion on our tight, three-month schedule. Of course, these are precisely the skills that the dissertation writing process hones: the minute attention to language and the nuances of complex ideas as well as the long view of how chapters

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<sup>1</sup> Latinx is a gender-neutral and non-gender binary term meant to refer to people of Latin American descent. It is meant to replace the more gendered terms Latino and Latina/o.

work together to create structure and argument, and finally, the drive to not merely think for the sake of thinking but *to finish!* My doctoral training has lended a rigor and sharpness to my thinking that enabled me to anticipate problems, identify gaps, and articulate solutions. At the same time, it has given me a healthy respect for the power of self-deadline and of breaking huge projects into manageable chunks, which was crucially important to ensuring that we would finish everything in time for LLEAD's October 27th conference, where we rolled out the system to a 50+ person audience for the first time. In return, through this experience I developed confidence in my ability to skillfully lead in non-academic settings by using both the skills and research background gained in my doctoral training.

Throughout the fellowship, my doctoral research background in Latinx studies and ethnic studies provided useful context, as I had a theory-level understanding of many of the issues we discussed, such as racism, immigration and ICE, and writing culturally relevant materials. But in a surprising twist, my very particular specialization in Latina/o gender and sexuality studies became even more centrally important, as I became the "expert" on a very contemporary debate within the Latinx community: what to call ourselves.

Briefly, as the label "Hispanic" waned in popularity for its colonial connection to Spain, "Latino" became the standard term to refer to people of Latin American descent. However, the "o" at the end of Latino genders the term masculine in Spanish, such that "Latino" becomes a perpetuation of the masculine as the default, as similarly seen in the English word "mankind." "Latina/o" has emerged to fill the gap, but relies on a gender binary in which the "a" and "o," male and female, are the only two options. Latinx has emerged within the last three years, primarily in academic and activist contexts, as a gender-neutral and non-gender binary term to refer to the community.

I raised this question early on, since whatever term we decided to use would feature prominently in the manual. While there was general support for changing "Latino" to "Latinx," I was consulted as the expert in the room due to my scholarly training in the subject, and tasked with articulating precise arguments for and against. At the next state board meeting, I gave a brief presentation and fielded questions. Soon after, the board voted to change not only the references in the manual to Latinx, but to change the *organization's official name*, previously "Latino Leaders," to "Latinx Leaders." On the day of the conference, I gave a 15-minute presentation to the audience about the term Latinx, what it meant, and why it was important to use a gender-neutral and non-gender binaristic term to refer to our community. This may be commonly agreed upon within an academic humanities context, but in this group of generally liberal but decidedly old-school activists, this frank discussion of queer and transgender people in the Latinx community may have been a near-first. I am happy to see that through its name change,

LLEAD has agreed to act as an ambassador for and supporter of LGBTQ issues within the Latinx community, and I am proud to have been a part of that.

In the end, our committee produced the 30-page “Latinx Crisis Response System Manual: Responding to Hate Crimes and Bias Incidents and Maintaining a LLEAD Crisis Response Team,” available in print and soon-to-be-published on LLEAD’s upcoming website. I wrote nine of the eighteen sections, formatted the manual, and used basic graphic design skills to update the organization’s logo and design the cover page. I helped craft a vision of how this system would be implemented, from local chapter training to how the heck LLEAD will reach Mexicanos in the Upper Peninsula. And finally, I helped plan the conference and develop the training, which will be exported throughout the state as more and more volunteers join the Crisis Response System network.

Throughout this fellowship, and especially toward its conclusion, the committee repeatedly told me: “We could not have done this without you.” They have repeatedly offered to take my dissertation chair out to lunch to elaborate on my work with them and they have asked if I know any other graduate students with access to professional development funding so that they, too, might become LLEAD graduate fellows. I say this to underscore the real need in the nonprofit world for support of many kinds -- academic expertise, writing and research experience, and good old fashioned problem-solving -- and the perfect bridge this program serves between real needs in the community and the development and application of on-the-ground skills that 21st century humanities PhD students need. I have greatly benefited from professional development programs which bring speakers in for a few hours, but nothing beats hands-on experience. This is exactly the niche this fellowship and others like it fill, and I hope that many more students will be able to benefit from this career-enhancing experience. Thank you!