

Cultivando Sabiduría

Cultivating Wisdom: Latino Elders and Civic Engagement

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AmeriCorps



Universidad Popular



California State University
SAN MARCOS



PURPOSE

This guide provides details of Cultivando Sabiduría (Cultivating Wisdom), a program we created to ignite and validate the civic engagement activities of low-income, Spanish-speaking Latino elders. Our team also presents methodological and theoretical innovations that helped us recognize strengths, along with understanding the economic, social and health benefits to volunteering and civic engagement for Latino elders. We will describe the Cultivando Sabiduría curriculum in detail. We also provide recommendations for broad implementation based on analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data.

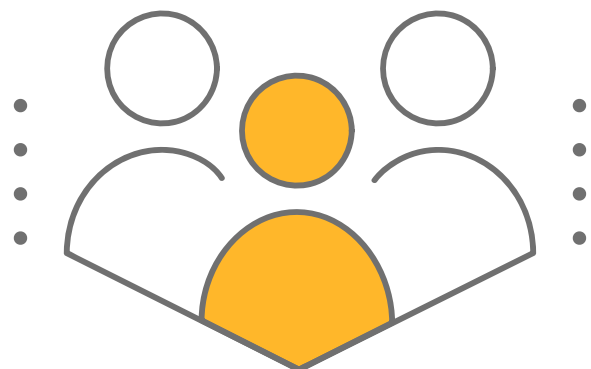


BY THE NUMBERS

There are 58 million Latinx elders in the United States (US Census, 2018).

By 2060, the number of elder Latinxs in the U.S. is projected to nearly triple from 8 million to 21.5 million (National Hispanic Council on Aging, 2017) and will account for 22% of all people ages 65 and older (Larson, Mathews, Torres, and Lea, 2017). Currently, 70% of all elder Latinxs reside in just four states: California, Texas, Florida, and New York, with the highest concentration in California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In San Diego County, Latinxs account for 34% of the total resident population (County of San Diego Community Health Statistics Unit, 2018).

While Latinx elders are among the fastest growing elderly populations in the United States (Hummer & Hayward, 2015), they have extremely low traditional forms of civic participation (García Bedolla, 2012). Our program sought to measure common cultural and social factors that promote civic behavior among the Latinx elder population, as well as the patterns of engagement in traditional political involvement (e.g., voting, volunteering for candidates or political organizations, contributions to campaigns) and in non-traditional civic engagement activities (e.g., grassroots efforts aimed to shape local initiatives or produce positive social change at the community level) among Latinx elders and outcomes on their health and wellness.



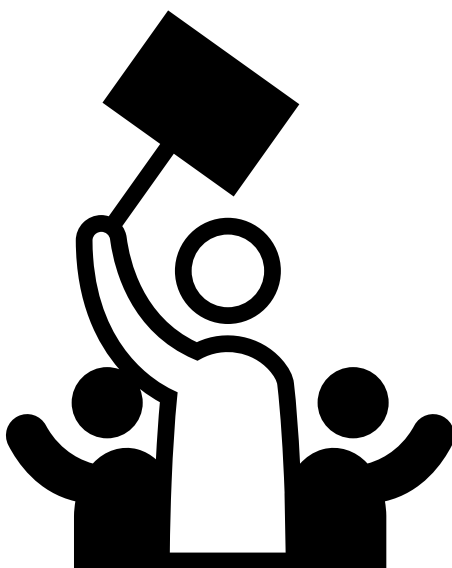
Over the last decade, San Diego County experienced a growth in the percentage of the Latinx population increasing from 27 to 32 percent.

In selected cities and neighborhoods, Latinxs account for 50 to 60 percent of the population. Locally collected data indicate they are disengaged from civic life and they have the lowest voter count and rate of voter turnout (Baldassare, Bonner, Kordus, & Lopes, 2016).

San Diego County follows state and national trends of low Latinx political engagement (García Bedolla, 2012; Dobar et al., 2016).

In California, Whites are overrepresented in almost every political activity, particularly when it comes to contributing money to political campaigns and writing to elected officials. On a national level, Latinxs are the most civically alienated group and the least likely to be broadly engaged (Sullivan & Godsay, 2014).

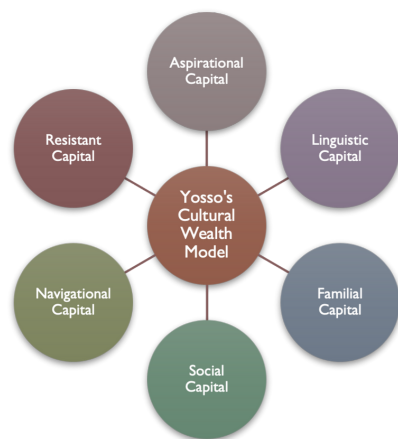
The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement advises that Latinxs **"must be connected to community-based activities** where their **contributions** to public issues are **valued** and their **efforts yield concrete results beyond the ballot box"** (Sullivan & Godsay, 2014).



GUIDING FRAMEWORK

Cultivando Sabiduría was based on two foundational theoretical frameworks. **Community Cultural Wealth** is utilized for its asset-oriented orientation (honoring the wisdom the elders already possess) and **Life Course theory** for its focus on elders.

We draw upon Tara Yosso's (2006) theory of cultural wealth, which describes a set of beliefs and practices that originate from family and culture that are sources of strength.



We believe that Latino elders, as viewed through a cultural wealth model, have incredible capacity to participate in civic engagement. The Cultivando Sabiduría curriculum operationalizes the “cultural wealth” model and the research approach to study this curriculum reflects a strength-based approach, rather than a deficit model.

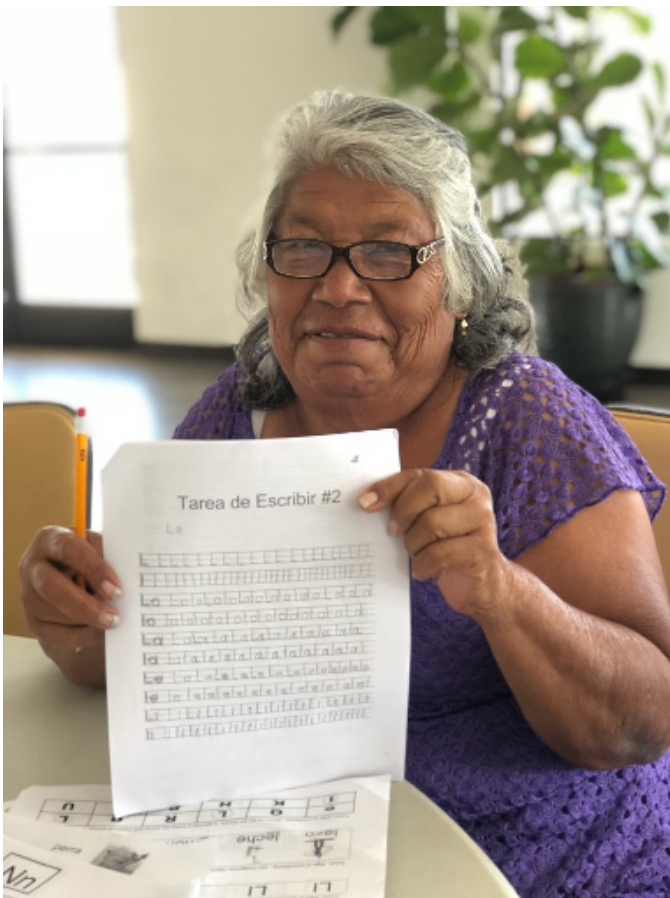
We also draw from a Life Course Perspective (Stroller & Gibson, 1999; Elder, Kirkpatrick, & Crosnoe, 2003) and Life Course Developmental Theory (Elder, 1998, 2008) to inform program curricula, and language, reading, and writing, resources and other tools.

Additionally, the concept of intersectionality is also important to understand the life course framework (Collins & Bilge, 2016) because it offers recognition that there are multiple forms of stratification that exist, support, and maintain opportunity structures. Each exerts influence at the same time, such that, intersecting social statuses produce unique paths for human experiences and that they are based on interacting social statuses, such as race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and immigration status.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC RELEVANCE

Latino elders already possess valuable social capital and strengths such as: aspirational (hopes and dreams), linguistic (power of storytelling), familial (working as a collective), social (working with neighbors), navigational (street smarts and survival), and resistance (encountering and dealing with oppressive conditions).

The educational curricula in Cultivando Sabiduría embed a life course framework into the ESL (English as a Second Language) and the Spanish Literacy and Writing courses to ensure relevant materials are used and the participants' strengths are acknowledged. The curriculum planning is extensively researched and designed to be reflective of common life course experiences of the participants of Cultivando Sabiduría.



OVERALL IMPACT

Participants graduating from the ten-week course will have increased knowledge of civic society and increased activity in both traditional and nontraditional forms of civic engagement. Priority is given to meeting basic fundamental needs of older persons and to the framing of elders met needs in all curriculum goals. This design highlights diversity, proximity, and social participation (i.e., social activities, being connected, community volunteering etc.). Elder reciprocity is especially important when satisfying elder's social needs.

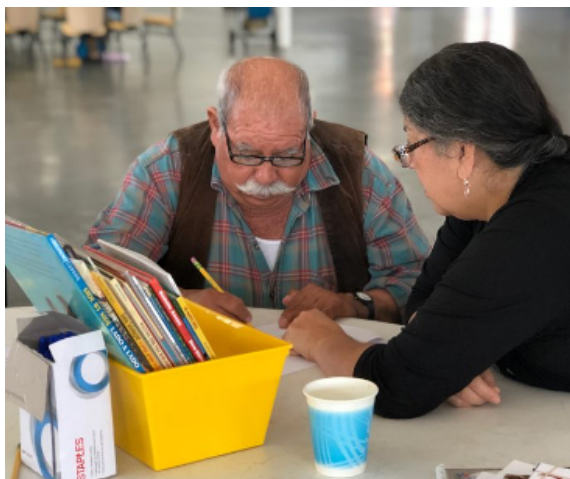


INTERVENTION



Cultivando Sabiduría is a class that uses best practices for organizing a civic and culturally appropriate education curriculum based within a developmental life course framework, the needs of elders, and is taught using “popular education” pedagogy.

The material is presented through a culturally responsive lens in English, Spanish, and bilingual formats which resonate with participants' histories and lived experiences within a safe and supportive environment.



A hallmark to the effectiveness of the program is that the entire community shares learning together. The program recognizes the importance of the extended family and the need for a comprehensive approach to education and political integration (Wilkin et al., 2009).



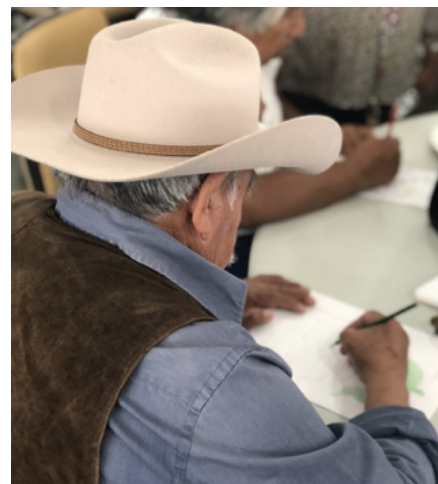
The class is often attended by children or grandchildren, or other extended kin; rather than restricting others, the students' guests are welcomed in class. Helping Latino elders gain cultural and social capital is an explicit part of the curriculum (Segura et al., 2001). Note, we only collect data for the elders enrolled in the program.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Cultivando Sabiduría offered a weekly 3-hour class and used best practices for organizing a civic and culturally appropriate education curriculum. It was held in the heart of a Latinx immigrant community of North County San Diego, where the census tract data indicate only 17% of the population attained a high school degree. The National Latino Research Center at the California State University San Marcos led this initiative through a grant from AmeriCorps (#17REHCA002).

The program was offered in a safe and supportive environment. Note: the program developed to meet the needs of Latinx elders after analyzing data based on a general, inter-generational civic engagement and leadership program based on popular education called, Cultivando Liderazgo (Nurturing Leadership). (See Nuñez-Alvarez, et al. 2018 for more details about this program). Both programs emerged from the National Latino Research Center and were supported by AmeriCorps grants.

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A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CULTURALLY VALIDATING CURRICULUM

The Cultivando Sabiduría curriculum connects volunteering and civic engagement to students' lives and aims to bring to life cultural wisdom and community history; taps into the exceptional minds and talents of elders to bring to life innovative ideas that can benefit the entire community; presents basic requirements, roles and responsibilities of an engaged citizenry; and, discusses issues of transportation, land use, sustainability, health, education, public safety, and business to examine multiple perspectives.

The program staff and student interns at the NLRC are bilingual, trained in culturally sensitive research methods and pedagogy. As a team, they assist in teaching the classes and provide one-on-one attention to the elders.

Through a series of speakers, field trips/tours, and in-class activities, students gathered information about the issues mentioned above and met leaders in the field to decide on what they wanted to do to tackle these local problems. Thus, Cultivando Sabiduría has become an important site for Latino elders in our region who are seeking to make a difference in their communities.

The curriculum is linguistically and culturally relevant. Dr. Gonzales has guided the curriculum to occur within a "safe environment" and is informed by four central elements needed for elders to be supported and thrive: feel useful (Relevance), provide support for coping (Security/Companionship), include celebrations (Self-Identity), and have achievable goals (Independence/Social & Civic Participation). See Figure 1.

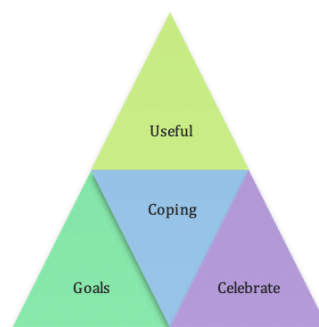


Figure 1: Elements to supporting and encouraging elders.

ELEMENTS FOR WELLBEING CORRESPONDING TO CULTIVANDO SABIDURÍA

1 Safety of Participants

Cultivando Sabiduría: Comfortable and reliable space for class; well trained staff to accommodate physical, mobility, communication and/or socio-emotional needs.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Security and Self-Identity

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Social Participation.

2 Affirming Self-Identity

Cultivando Sabiduría: Teaching in Spanish, drawing on students' strengths and wisdom, using culturally relevant materials, and fieldtrips connecting to students' lives and experiences.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Relevance.

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Emotional Security, and Social Participation and reciprocity.

3 Educational Growth

Cultivando Sabiduría: Using popular education approach to teach civic education, literacy, technology. Asking participants to use their talents and passions to teach others. Research assistants and staff becoming "learners" through the students' contributions and sharing of expertise.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Self-Identity, Relevance, Social Participation

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Security.

4 Relevant and Manageable Goals

A Few Relevant and Manageable Goals
Cultivando Sabiduría: Activities conducted in each class that are doable and can be completed within the time period. Tracking progress in literacy classes with positive affirmation. Noting incremental and significant progress in technology and crafting classes.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Relevance, Social Participation

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Security.

5 Using Technologies

Cultivando Sabiduría: Introducing features on technological devices to connect students to others, news, and social issues important to them. Practicing technology use with helpers who speak Spanish.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Relevance.

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Security.

6 Feeling Useful (connectedness)

Cultivando Sabiduría: Group work, potlucks, peer teaching, celebrations and leadership development.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Relevance, Independence.

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Security. Social and Civic Participation

7 Adaptive Responses and Flexibility

Cultivando Sabiduría: Validating personal history, physical activities, classes rotating activities, and fieldtrips.

Primary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Security.

Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Relevance, Self-Identity.

8 Relevant and Manageable Goals

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Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Security.

CLASS PROFILE



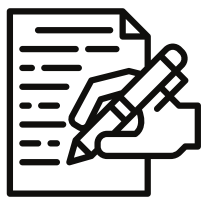
- Local Latinx immigrant elders.
- Mostly female “younger older” adults who tend to live with their spouses or other relatives in single-family homes or apartment/condos.



- Fixed income between \$1,000 - \$2500 a month and supporting between 1-4 people in the household.
- Unemployed due to retirement or unable to find meaningful and well paying work.



- Limited formal education.
- Engaged in educational activities through other Universidad Popular classes.



- Consistent and enthusiastic attendance.
- Enrolled in vocational classes to improve reading and writing skills in both Spanish and English.

TYPICAL SCHEDULE

Cultivando Sabiduría met each Thursday morning from 9am to 11am. However, the students would usually arrive at 8am and are often found waiting at the locked door of the community center. The students usually stayed until noon.

Cultivando Sabiduría begins with refreshments and mingling until 9am. Students brought homemade treats and brewed coffee provided by the community center. The expansive room was always filled with the buzz of conversation as students arrive, greetings, and catching up with each other about the week.

When class begins, the students then gathered as a group to begin the first interactive module that uses popular education pedagogy (9-10am). These health and wellness sessions were led by multicultural elder service provider, Rosa López, who provided lectures, offered activities such as Zumba and stretching, and invited guests to share about health and wellness. Every Thursday, she invited a presenter from one of these agencies to talk about the different resources that are available for them.



MINI-CLASSES

Students are free to choose between four offerings for the remaining time:

- Crafting (Manualidades)
- Technology (using phone, tablet and computer features)
- Spanish literacy (reading, writing)
- English literacy (reading, writing and speaking).

The literacy classes resulted in one of the most popular classes and is essential to furthering the civic engagement of our community. Mexican immigrant elders have some of the lowest literacy levels due in part to their limited access of formal schooling in their home country (Krause et al. 2011).



CRAFTING-MANUALIDADES

One of the pillars to support elders is to be sure there are elements of a program that are related to success and achieving goals. The crafting draws on talents that many of the students have and also sets up a peer-to-peer learning environment. There are primarily two señoras who are the leads in the Manualidades group.

While they make their knitting and jewelry, they also use this time to share about their lives, families, and problems that they are facing. A strong friendship bond has been created between many of them. Furthermore, when they are facing difficult situations, they support each other.

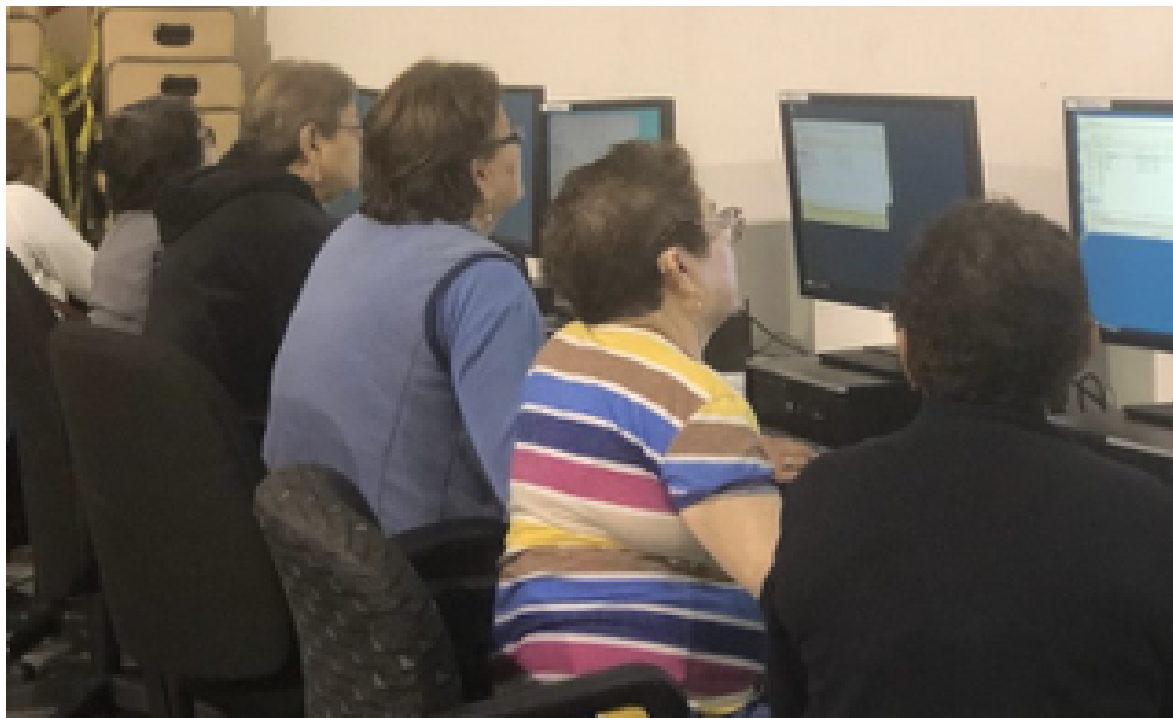
The craft class is important because it is the only class led by the elders. They take joy in sharing their techniques and enjoy watching the process of the college student interns learn new skills.



TECHNOLOGY-DIGITAL LITERACY

Staff and tutors dedicate time to work one-on-one with elder to teach them how to use smart phones, laptops and tablets. Students have been learning to make calls, send texts messages, and use Facebook to communicate with their family and friends. They have been learning to use different apps from their phones and are very glad that the “youth generation” is helping them to catch up with the accelerated technological advances.

Although participants report having ease of access to technological devices like smartphones, tablets, and computers, many have never really used all the applications available including the Internet or WiFi. For example, one participant owns the latest iPhone, a gift by a relative, but has never used it beyond making or receiving calls.



LITERACY: ENGLISH AND SPANISH

The Cultivando Sabiduría Literacy Program for Elders provides relevant, engaging, positive support, and most importantly, love and confirmation. It is our explicit intention to create space for our students to use their “full range of diverse linguistic talents” (MacSwan, 2019: 208) in our classes.

Dr. Gonzalez led this initiative by specifically choosing program books, readings, and lessons to acknowledge our elder’s own life course experiences, confirm their identity, and highlight personal empowerment.

Unlike other adult learners, older adults are initially motivated to learn what they see as relevant to their lives, rather than achieving any academic standard. Books, therefore, are chosen to relate to Latino life course histories.

The relevance of these books speaks to the world they have lived in and motivates participants effectively. The longer they read the more interested they are in conceptual ideas such as civic participation, social justice, life and physical sciences, and hunger for more knowledge about the social world they live in. In this program, elders quickly begin to share their knowledge, life experiences, social contributions, and the readings start to elicit their oral histories, thereby expanding our own historical knowledge.

Literacy also restructures their world perceptions, personal language, storytelling, life observations, and provides them with greater community and civic agency.



LITERACY: DR. ALICIA GONZALEZ

Dr. Alicia Gonzales created, developed and refined the Spanish and English curriculum for the Cultivando Sabiduría Literacy Program for Elders which provides relevant, engaging, positive support, and most importantly, love and confirmation.

English Development

The participants of Sabiduría initially stated at the start of this program, that they wanted help with literacy and in learning to speak English, or to at least learn some basic communication skills in English. They want for example, to be able to communicate with the bus driver, at the market to ask when they do not find a product, or to make their own doctor's appointment on the phone. We also saw this as a great opportunity to guide them into new avenues for civic participation. Their petition was heard.

Dr. Gonzales and the NLRC interns who created and prepared materials for role-playing in English-setting scenarios related to their everyday life. The settings include a grocery store, restaurant, bakery, bank, clothing store, and bus/sprinter station. Students practice their English skills in this safe and protected environment and report greatly enjoying this motivating play. As such, Cultivando Sabiduría program curriculums strongly promote functional reading and applied language skills needed to increase connections in the community and highlight participant's importance in terms of leadership and investment in others.

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LITERACY: DR. ALICIA GONZALEZ

Spanish Development

Dr. Gonzales also created a Spanish literacy class. Older Latinos have very high rates of non-literacy in both Spanish and English. Most doubt they can read. They have lived long enough to know that they can live without reading. To increase literacy, the least complicated path to literacy quickly proved to be learning to read and write in their own language. Knowledge of one's native language motivates and empowers literacy (Escamilla, 1999).

The curriculum and pedagogy validates the elders' rich life experiences. Class materials rely on familiar symbolic images designed with adults in mind and use non-threatening, non-academic approaches to teach reading and writing to older Spanish speaking adults and elders.

Each lesson is best done with a tutor for each adult learner for one-on-one attention. The lessons can also be done in a small group setting provided you encourage those who can somewhat read to support others to engage in peer learning. However, the peer learning approach needs additional coaching so that the higher level readers allow their peers to learn at their own pace. For larger groups you can create multiple small groups, each with a dedicated tutor.

Dr. Gonzales produced a community literacy book based on her approach. Contact the National Latino Research Center or Dr. Marisol Clark-Ibáñez for a free copy.



SOMOS MULTILINGÜES: AFFIRMING THE CULTURE AND LINGUISTIC CAPITAL OF OLDER LATINOS

Project leaders, Dr. Arcela Nuñez-Alvarez and Ana Ardon, developed a curriculum, *Somos Multilingües* (We are Multilingual), to counteract the cultural and linguistic disparities of traditional ESL models, affirm the cultural diversity of the local region, and acknowledge the linguistic contributions of Latino immigrants and older adults. A series of lessons and activities using Paulo Friere's popular education and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model as conceptual frameworks to teach about language, linguistic rights, and linguistic diversity in both Latino and border communities, while at the same time teaching students how to write, read, and speak English.

The classes were conducted on an ongoing weekly basis at a pace that was responsive to the learning styles and needs of students. On the first session, they conducted a plática to assess students' satisfaction in previous English classes and interest in the new conceptual framework. Then, the leads shared with students the principles of popular education and the value of community cultural wealth to emphasize the importance of multilingual and multicultural learning. Later, a discussion was facilitated about experiences as students in formal and informal education to document the challenges and opportunities related to learning as adults.

Students shared that although they had received no more than a third-grade education they were hungry for knowledge.

They wanted to be lifelong students.

SOMOS MULTILINGÜES

In our classes for *Somos Multilingües*, the goal was to strengthen the collective acknowledgment that Latino communities are richly diverse in nationality, immigrant experiences, language, and cultural beliefs and values. Some of the topics for discussions include the following:

- **Regionalismos** – Students wanted to learn about the colloquial ways in which Latinos communicate in Spanish according to the geographical region in which they originate.
- **Dichos y proverbios** – Students shared that one of the ways in which they were able to learn was by using vernacular phrases and proverbs that were passed on from their parents from one generation to another. We also incorporated typical American phrases used in the border region (in English, Spanish, and Spanglish).
- **Ancestral recipes** – Students learned to identify in Spanish and English the medicinal plants and herbs from their countries of origin as well as those native to California, and family recipes of traditional foods from their cultures. We began to develop a list of recipes unique to the group.
- **Communication with grandchildren** – Many students understand the value of generational storytelling but felt disconnected from the lives of their grandchildren. Many expressed that the lack of a commonly spoken language created a cultural divide and hindered a close relationship with their grandchildren. In a typical immigrant household, elders speak Spanish while grandchildren communicate mainly in English. We spent several sessions discussing ways to use language to improve communication with younger relatives.



SOMOS MULTILINGÜES

Every class began by welcoming and greeting each other in Spanish, English, and Mixteco. Then, key concepts were reviewed and revisited from previous classes. Lessons were based on students' feedback and interests, including how to communicate message in different settings like the clinic, the grocery store, how to provide meaningful testimony in public forums, and how to communicate with relatives and friends at home, at work, and in the local community. The team utilized teaching methods that were responsive to diverse learning styles including visual, written, and oral forms of engagement.

Latino elders in North San Diego County live within 30 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. Latino communities are impacted by border-related issues that define the ways in which civic engagement occurs. Many class conversations focused on stories of racism, xenophobia, and how living in an anti-immigrant climate affected how they viewed their own culture and language.

Students understood that we are bound by shared experiences. Though we may speak different languages, all are valuable and expressing our culture through many linguistic ways is part of our human rights.



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Literacy is strongly linked to civic engagement, especially among ESL (English as a Second Language) students. As such, Cultivando Sabiduría program curriculums strongly promote functional reading and applied language skills needed to increase connections in the community and highlight participant's importance in terms of leadership and investment in others.

Twice a month, Dr. Arcela Nuñez-Alvarez provides interactive lessons related to civic engagement. Additional sessions are added when there are timely issues related to concerns at the government, county, local levels and/or elections.

Sabiduría participants have a history of volunteerism and civic engagement that in some cases begins in their country of origin before they immigrated; they carried that knowledge and community experience as they settled in North San Diego County. Some learned the value in voting when they were young, reporting they "always voted" before immigrating and continuing to vote in the U.S. once becoming naturalized citizens.

Although very informed, connected, and engaged, there are some areas in which Sabiduría participants are not as engaged; usually traditional forms of civic engagement have not been welcoming and nurturing spaces for Spanish-speaking elders. Many participants have never donated or volunteered in political campaigns; have never expressed their concerns either in writing or orally at public hearings or public meetings.



ELDER OUTREACH

Cultivando Sabiduría is also a place to celebrate milestones and holidays, particularly those that are culturally validating.

Culturally validating Celebrations of milestones and holidays tremendously help to fulfill basic primary and secondary needs of elders.

All the participants referred to the program a “their class” and identified themselves as “students.” They came to Cultivando Sabiduría with low levels of formal education. Elders reported working in Mexico as children and adolescents so were unable to attend school. Now, they are finally able to become students.



PROGRAM LOGISTICS: ENCOURGING ATTENDANCE & TRACKING PARTICIPATION

Our program had excellent retention and enrollment blossomed each term. We share here advice about encouraging attendance and tracking participation.

Sabiduría began October 2017 and, due COVID-19 pandemic, conclude program delivery in March 2020.

At any given time, 30 to 40 students attend class. Sabiduría classes continually evolve to engage in the elders' critical thinking, health, and creativity. The highest attendance days were for celebratory events such as Mother's Day and community field trips.

The NLRC interns call every student who is enrolled the day before class to remind them about coming to class and see if they need any transportation assistance. Therefore, even if they do not physically attend class that week, they have contact with program staff who can provides support and resources during these phone calls.

During the pandemic, when we suspended any in-person activities and classes, the Sabiduría students were called every week to check in on their health and well-being.



CULTIVANDO SABIDURIA:

A MODEL FOR LATINX CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL INCLUSION, AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT



Cultivando Sabiduría responded to the needs of elders and of the community. Students shared wisdom among themselves and they learn skills that they have identified as useful, meaningful and important to their health, daily activities, and civic life.

The baseline portrait of Latinx elders defies the generalized research findings that Latinxs are less likely to be civically engaged. When we ask Latinxs elders about community volunteering, we began to see the vibrant activities that lead to stronger neighborhoods and schools.

Our findings result in actionable and evidence-based strategies that lead to an increased understanding of political underrepresentation and pathways for civic engaged elderly Latinos.

We see that a majority of Latino elders in this study indicated that they volunteer because they want to help others. They care about their community. The elders draw from their cultural and life experiences to contribute their skills, passions, and wisdom. Supported by linguistically and culturally relevant curriculum, the Latino elders in our study have life experiences that are seen as crucial assets to be built upon and are emerging as leaders in their communities and in our region.

CULTIVANDO SABIDURIA

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