

Latinos at LMU: Creating A Community
By Ariana Quinonez

“Father Merrifield made it a priority to begin diversifying the student population and providing the financial aid to make that possible” Father Engh

It is energizing to hear that in the midst of Loyola Marymount’s Centennial celebration, the university has once again been recognized for its efforts to provide a quality education to Latino students. In its annual rankings, *Hispanic Outlook* magazine ranked LMU number one amongst California private universities in terms of the percentage and number of Hispanic students who graduate with Bachelor’s degrees. This honor succeeds a 2010 study done by The Education Trust, which ranked LMU 7th amongst private universities in the nation for graduating Hispanic students. That same year, *Excelencia in Education* recognized LMU’s proactive efforts to maintain and increase diversity among its student body. Collectively, these acknowledgments honor the effort that LMU has put forth in striving to achieve what Father Engh has referred to as “inclusive excellence.”

However, the success in building diversity at LMU did not happen overnight. Although Hispanics have been a central and important part of the Los Angeles and California community since its inception, Loyola University, while embedded in the heart of LA, began as an academic institution committed to the education of Catholic young men—most of whom inevitably came from a privileged, white-Anglo background. As a Mexican immigrant who had to work two jobs to put himself through school, Jose Legaspi, class of ’70, was the opposite of the stereotypical Loyola scholar. Because of his struggles to fund his education, Legaspi often felt disconnected from his Loyola peers who he believed couldn’t understand where he was coming from. Legaspi explains, “There was a ... feel[ing] that maybe some of us shouldn’t be here... I took it so personal when I was walking out of this lab test and somebody said, ‘Oh, the only reason why he’s here is because he’s Mexican. And he probably doesn’t even have the grades.’” There were not a lot of Latinos in higher education at that time, and as Legaspi put it, “when I was growing up, it wasn’t cool to be Mexican.”

This started to change after the 1968 Walkouts in East Los Angeles. Traveling on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement was a realization of the Mexican-American community’s self-worth. As Legaspi explains, “It became ‘Brown is Beautiful.’ So it was okay to be Hispanic. Up until that point, anybody that would aspire for higher education... would try to assimilate into [the] American way of life and ...forget completely about their culture...dissociate themselves from the rest of the Hispanic community.” But 1968 was a time for change and reinvention in the Mexican-American community of Los Angeles; Legaspi adds, “1968 was a break from the old and the start of the new of the Hispanic awareness. And so, a lot of people went back to their Mestizo roots.”

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Around this same time, LMU was undergoing its own cultural awakening under the guidance of Donald Merrifield, SJ. As the school's 11th President from 1969-1984, Father Merrifield was the first to head the newly merged Loyola Marymount University. Merrifield was a great proponent for increasing LMU's diversity, and he strongly believed that education should be inclusive. During his tenure as President, LMU increased financial aid initiatives, provided more scholarships, and held recruitment drives in underrepresented areas with the hopes of drawing more minority students to LMU. In remembering Father Merrifield, Legaspi said, "[Merrifield] was always prodding for action from us. I had not realized how strongly he felt about the underrepresented minorities—he was way ahead of his time...."

In the late 1960s, LMU took a big step forward in its support for Latino students by implementing a Chicana/o Studies program—one of the first programs of its kind in the nation. Chicana/o Studies focuses on the history of Hispanics—primarily Mexican Americans—in the United States, with a focus on the community's unique culture, art and literature. Ernesto Colin, the Valedictorian for the class of '99 at LMU, double majored in Chicano Studies and Spanish. Being the first in his family to go to college, Colin felt that at LMU he would truly be supported as an individual, and one of the most valuable things that he got from LMU was his experience in the Chicano Studies department. Colin explains, "I always wanted to be [a Chicano Studies major]... With LMU having one of the original Chicano Studies programs in all the nation, I think that's significant that it had a place here, has a history here. And I thought that was very special... not every school had a Chicano Studies department." Besides the opportunities he had within the department, Colin adds that, "there was a nice connection between the formal department and the extracurricular experiences that were Chicano focused... The professors and the Chicano Studies department also supported [the students] in MEChA, in the Latino Business Association, in El Espejo, in CLSS."

The programs mentioned by Colin are just some of those developed at LMU to help support Latino students on campus. Chicano Latino Student Services (CLSS) is the main vehicle through which most of these programs run. It was developed at LMU to aid in the success of Hispanic students and to additionally serve as a field for promoting Latino culture and raising awareness on issues that affect the Latino community. Organizations attached to CLSS include the academic-based Latino Business Student Association, Society of Hispanic Engineers, and the Spanish Club, which annually produces a bilingual scholarly journal titled *La Voz*. Additionally, the service organizations, Underwings Prazis Organization and El Espejo, are affiliated with CLSS, as well as the social justice-based club Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA).

In addition to the support services on campus for LMU's Latino students, the Mexican American Alumni Association (MAAA) was founded in 1981 to provide support to incoming

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students based on financial need, academic excellence, and a commitment to the Latino community. Since its establishment, the association has been able to provide more than \$2.5 million dollars to over 1,000 Latino students at LMU. According to 1986 LMU Alum and current President of the MAAA, Alex Chaves, the organization had a modest beginning: “I believe [the MAAA] scholarship was about \$1,000, maybe \$1,200 and we were only giving it to 20 or 30 students.” Since then, the MAAA has significantly increased its support for students: currently, the average scholarship is \$6,000 which is renewable for four years. Explaining the growth of MAAA’s support for students, Chaves stressed the support of LMU: “...one thing I’ve got to say is that the University has been very open and very flexible to our requests.” Because of the University’s support, Chaves hopes that the number of MAAA scholarships could potentially double in the next several years. “Scholarships,” Chaves has recently explained, “are gateways to higher education for many of our students.”

These opportunities presented through financial aid have certainly been a factor in the increase of Latino students on LMU’s campus; one in five students on campus is Latino, and 96% of these students are on financial aid. And although LMU may not originally have been structured in a way that promoted diversity within its student body, it was only a matter of time before the shared values of faith and family and the Jesuit commitment to providing a quality education came together to provide a home for Latinos at this university. Through the support LMU has shown its Hispanic students and the work that was done by those in the Chicano Movement, Latino students have not only been able to integrate into the LMU community, but they have also created an educated community of scholars that will influence the new millennium with the support of Jesuit ideals.