



20

AÑOS

20

STORIES

*Celebrating 20 years of
The Latino Education Institute
at Worcester State University
2000-2020*



WORCESTER STATE UNIVERSITY
LATINO EDUCATION INSTITUTE



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A VISION FOR LEI



Barry Maloney

President, Worcester State University

Worcester State University President Barry Maloney is the product of public education. His mother was an elementary teacher, his father a school administrator, and his wife Laura, a Westfield School Committee member.

With such a background, Mr. Maloney readily recognized the value of the Latino Education Institute (LEI) to the community as well as its importance to Worcester State's mission when he began his tenure as the university's 11th president in 2011.

"We were founded as a teacher training school, so it's right in our wheelhouse," Mr. Maloney said, referring to Worcester State's founding as the Worcester Normal School in 1874, then the fifth state-funded normal school in Massachusetts.

Importantly, Mr. Maloney concluded that LEI's educational approach not only provided a foundation for effective teaching and learning, but that the Institute had the potential to be a template for boosting Latino postsecondary prospects statewide. "The model put in place (in 1999) is the same model we have followed for 20 years," he said. "It's a model that cuts the bureaucracy out of the conversation and goes directly to schools that need the help.

"Then the schools, whether they be elementary, middle, or high schools, get a chance to tailor their work to the wrap-around services we provide to keep the students and their families focused on postsecondary education." The LEI's staff, Mr. Maloney noted, "do as much work with young people as they do with families" in underscoring the value of a postsecondary degree. "Sometimes we are also out there helping those moms and dads and grandparents and guardians with English language skills to make sure they are also upskilling themselves and feeling more confident about supporting their sons, daughters, or grandchildren," Mr. Maloney said.

LEI, according to Mr. Maloney, has had no problems working with individual schools, principals, and teachers, or in recruiting young people and teachers (college students or k-12 teachers) to staff its programs. "This is where LEI has been really nimble. It has not asked to do the work of the superintendent. The thought process has been, 'let's get to where the work needs to happen, and then sell the success of the work up the ladder to the school committees and the superintendents of the world.'" But while the LEI model works, funding is a barrier to scaling up the model, as the university

would like to do, he said.

Nevertheless, Worcester State remains committed to growing the Institute. Mr. Maloney noted that in 2008 when the state stopped direct funding to LEI-typed initiatives housed in public higher education institutions, Worcester State made LEI an integral part of its operation. "It is labor-intensive, which means the vast amount of the cost that is associated here at the university are personnel costs," he said. "We are in the people business, so the challenge then is being able to afford expansion. We have broadened the scope over the 20-year period, at the same time, we are still looking for ways to do more, and the biggest barrier is funding." LEI, however, is worth the investment, he said. "What we have found is that the model, while labor-intensive, pays dividends in terms of the outcomes," he said. "You can't argue with the success rate, high school attainment rate, college acceptance rate and the bachelor's attainment rate. "Unfortunately, we are talking about hundreds of students as opposed to thousands of students." ♦

ATREVETE!



In 1999 I was working in the corporate sector in Boston and joined an education initiative called the Massachusetts Education Initiative for Latino Students (MEILS). This was a statewide effort looking to improve the educational experience of

Latino students across the Commonwealth. This was an exciting time for me as I was transitioning from business to education and decided to attend graduate school at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It was this initiative for Latino students that sparked my interest and passion for education policy.

Several years later, I was asked to join the advisory committee of the Latino Education Institute and the Mayor's Commission on Educational Excellence. I never thought that today I would be the Executive Director who was tasked with celebrating 20 years of LEI's impact with our community.

What I love most about the mission of the LEI is our direct impact with families and youth as we guide them to become thriving young professionals. Their stories become our success stories and we know we have touched them because they come back to tell us. I am proud of the 20 stories we are highlighting for our anniversary, but these are just a few. We have so many more to share and celebrate. We thank Worcester State University, our home, and all the staff, funders, board of advisors, parents and the students who work so hard to persist.

ATREVETE! We have your back.

Hilda Ramirez

Executive Director, Latino Education Institute

LEI STAFF

Josephine Falero
Office Manager

Mary Jo Marion
AVP of Urban Affairs and Latino Education Institute

Kathy Orengo
Program Manager

Hilda Ramirez
Executive Director

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LEADERSHIP HIGHLIGHTS



Mary Jo Marion
Executive Director
2008-2019

The LEI is a labor of love. Love of cultural wealth, community promise and the power of education. My experiences as a policy professional working at the national level coupled with years of engaging in research and practice related to urban education made me a true believer in the power of the LEI model.

During these years the LEI increased the number of families served, expanded programs, published important research findings, lead Latino-centric civic engagement efforts, and opened a Springfield office. As the Latinx community grew in numbers and strength, so did our ability to reflect the cultural wealth assets of our community and to offer pathways to success for youth and families.

I am most proud of serving alongside the LEI youth and staff who are now emerging leaders in the city and of the growing recognition of the Institute as a best practice model across the Commonwealth. As Latinx leaders we know all too well that progress for the community will come in great part from the community. It is an honor to continue to shepherd the development of the LEI within Worcester State and across the Commonwealth.



Maria Del Rio
Executive Director
2002-2007

I was well aware of the academic needs of Latinx¹ students after having worked in the public schools of Boston, Chelsea, Amherst-Pelham, Springfield, and Worcester. I attended the first Massachusetts Summit on Latino Education at Worcester State University (formerly known as Worcester State College) in 1999. The summit was promoted by the Worcester Working Coalition for Latino Students (WWCLS), a community-based organization led by U.S Representative James McGovern and Judge Luis Perez. The WWCLS stated its commitment to improving educational and vocational outcomes for Latinos. I wholeheartedly joined in! In order to implement a comprehensive approach encompassing parental outreach and engagement, academic enrichment and support, and exposure to career and higher education opportunities the WWCLS created the Latino Education Institute in 2000.

I served as the executive director from 2002 until the beginning of 2007. In this role, I administered all aspects of the LEI's activities and supervised staff, wrote and managed grants, coordinated public relations, developed and implemented programs and supervised research and evaluation initiatives. It was an honor and a great learning experience to work closely with Judge Luis Perez, Gladys Rodriguez, Lisa Perez, Dr. David Caruso, and Dr. James Caradonio during this period!

¹ *The terms Latino/Latina and Latinx are used interchangeably in this document.*

THE STORY OF THE LATINO EDUCATION INSTITUTE

By Clive McFarlane

The Institute, which reaches about 2,800 families and 768 students K-12, runs a plethora of programs supporting literacy, leadership, civic engagement, healthy living and violence prevention.

PROLOGUE

In 1999, as concerns around the flagging academic performance of Latino students soared, Judge Luis Perez and Gladys Rodriguez, district director for U.S. Rep Jim McGovern, cornered Worcester Superintendent of Schools James Caradonio in his office.

At the time, Judge Perez and Ms. Rodriguez led the Worcester Working Coalition for Latino Students (WWCLS), a community-directed effort to improve the educational and social well-being of Latino Students in the city.

The two, having grown up in the city, understood the extent to which the school system struggled to raise academic outcomes for Latino students, and they had spent years imploring a succession of Worcester schools' superintendents to implement appropriate remedies.

It was Mr. Caradonio's turn to hear them out.

"They came in and said 'our kids need this,' and I said, 'gee, we have a program that does that,'" Mr. Caradonio recalled.

"And they said 'our kids need this' and I said, 'we have three programs that do that.' And it went on like that for a while."

In previous face-offs with Worcester Public Schools administrators, Judge Perez had often had to resort to lawsuits to get his point across. It was different this time around.

Perhaps it was a testimony to the strength of the community activism at the time.

Maybe it was the dire prospects, acknowledged by everyone, that Latino students then faced under a new and standardized state exam, but Judge Perez and Ms. Rodriguez didn't file a suit this time.

The confrontation in his office ended with Mr. Caradonio joining the WWCLS and its remarkably diverse board of parents, students, educators, elected and appointed officials, community activists, and business and union leaders.

CHAPTER 1

The Latino Education Institute

The Latino Education Institute (LEI) at Worcester State University is a direct outcome of that 1999 collaborative effort.

The Institute embraces three key elements that the WWCLS believed were necessary to improve the educational experience of Latino students materially.

It has a stable and reliable postsecondary partner in Worcester State. It has a strong family engagement component and a commitment to pursue practical educational policy changes at the local and state level.

Today as the Institute celebrates its 20th anniversary, those three pillars of engagement, along with its nuts and bolts education support services, have led LEI to become a statewide leader in effective Latino education programming, research and advocacy.

LEI currently serves about 2,800 families and 768 students K-12 and runs a variety of programs supporting literacy, leadership, civic engagement, healthy living and violence prevention.

The Institute's focus on the "whole family" includes providing mentoring and tutoring, Out of School Time (OST) enrichment programs, SAT preparation, college readiness, civic engagement, parental training, a parent resource center, leadership development programs, and summer enrichment academics.

LEI also provides elementary through postsecondary support to young people, to include work-study placements. It also offers career assistance to its college graduates.

"In my eight years at LEI, I have seen so many students do well after graduating from Worcester State because they are bilingual and gained job skills in our programs," LEI's executive director Hilda Ramirez said.

"This is what I love the most about our mission. We see it come alive every year as our participants grow in our programs."

That's a sentiment shared by many in the community.

“LEI is the best thing that came out of the working coalition,” John Rodriguez, a guidance counselor at Worcester East Middle School, said, recalling that he joined the WWCLS back when he was working at the Worcester Housing Authority in 1999.

“As a young person growing up in Great Brook Valley, with the lack of services, the discrimination and everything we went through, it was needed advocacy, particularly on the education side,” he said of joining the group.

“It is gratifying that the work paid off; that we have LEI... still there, doing a lot of good for the Latinos in Worcester.”

In Mr. Rodriguez and Ms. Ramirez’s words, one can perhaps sense that LEI, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, is more than just a sum of its programs, advocacy and research capabilities.

Dig down a little and you will see that it is also the story of a community, a story of hope, resilience and defiance in the most vulnerable of times.

Judge Perez, in his remarks at LEI’s opening ceremony Oct. 24, 2000, spoke to this hope and defiance then.

“We have to create the will, and that is what Worcester has done,” he said of the LEI initiative.

“We have to stand up.”

CHAPTER 2 Standing Up

A lot of people stood up for Latino students in 1999, more than 150, according to a WWCLS membership report. And there were many other supporters whose names didn’t appear on the membership list.

Kaylan Ghosh, former president of Worcester State and one of the Institute’s more passionate boosters and founder, was among those who stood up.

Mr. Ghosh helped write the grant that won LEI \$1 million in Kellogg’s Foundation funding. He

also donated space at Worcester State to house the Institute. He was driven to act, he said, out of concern that Latino students would face a bleak future if their underachievement levels persisted.

In his LEI opening ceremony remarks, he warned of what would happen if Latino students’ underachievement was not reversed.

“None of them will be going to college,” he said.

“It is that simple.”

Others who stood up included State Senators Michael Moore and Harriette Chandler, who helped secure \$250,000 in annual state funding in 2002.

Congressman Jim McGovern, long a supporter of the Latino community in words and deeds, stood up. He advocated on behalf of the Institute and was influential in securing financial assistance from the George H. and Sybil F. Fuller Foundation, according to Mark Fuller, the foundation’s chairman.

The foundation, Mr. Fuller said, continues to fund Worcester State scholarships that are awarded exclusively to Latino Students.

Mr. Fuller was not surprised that his late father, Russell Fuller, was enticed by Mr. McGovern and the WWCLS overture.

The foundation’s benefactors—his great aunt and uncle, Sybil and George—had deep ties to the community.

The couple, he said, used to worship at the Old South Congregational Church on Main Street, which has since been converted to an apartment complex, he noted.

And although his aunt and uncle had no children, they had a deep sense of the community’s needs, Mr. Fuller said.

“We understand that Worcester has always been a city of immigrants,” he said.

“We can all look back, and the only thing that has

“Equality is giving everybody shoes. Equity is giving people shoes that fit.”

changed are the countries from which immigrants are presently coming.

“My dad was the ultimate people’s person. He just cared. When things would come up as the city was transforming from generation to generation, his focus was on ‘Where is the need?’

“He saw that the need was increasingly growing in the Hispanic population, and he embraced the challenge early on.”

In 1999, however, such embrace was often withheld from the Latino community in many areas of city life.

CHAPTER 3

Equality Versus Equity

It is understandable why Mr. Caradonio would have been a bit defensive during his 1999 conversation with Judge Perez and Ms. Rodriquez.

He and his predecessor James Garvey, under whom Mr. Caradonio served as deputy superintendent for six years, had done much to address the challenges faced by Latino students.

The Garvey/Caradonio administration, for example, created programs for high school dropouts and teenage mothers and offered an array of other student support services.

Yet, when the WWCLS began its work in 1999, Latino students had the highest dropout and suspension rates, and the lowest achievement levels of Worcester public school students.

And while they made up 25% of the student population, of the 318 Worcester high school dropouts in the 1996-1997 school year, 140 or about 44% were Latino students, according to a report compiled by the WWCLS.

Outside of the schools, poverty, lack of safe spaces and youth programs and a sense of being an outcast in their city drove many young people to despair.

“People want to make it big; they want to get recognized, but they can’t do it without programs,” a male participant lamented during a focus group discussion in 1999.

The focus group, commissioned by the WWCLS and led by Clark University professor Laurie Ross, was meant to help teenagers “participate meaningfully in their communities and...showcase their talents and skills.”

The dismal test scores of Latino students on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests, just three years before the 10th grade Math and English portions would become a graduation requirement, was another pressing issue in 1999.

According to the WWCLS, at least 83% of Latino students would not have received a high school diploma if the MCAS was a prerequisite for graduation that year.

Mr. Caradonio understood the urgency. After speaking with the WWCLS, he realized that the coalition’s initiatives complemented what he and his staff were already doing to raise the school system’s MCAS scores.

“Equality is giving everybody shoes. Equity is giving people shoes that fit,” Mr. Caradonio said recently in explaining why he decided to join forces with the WWCLS.

He said he paid two consultants to help the coalition develop an action plan, on the condition that they “keep the goals of the school system in mind.”

“It was done without worrying about what my teachers knew, what my principals knew,” Mr. Caradonio said.

“It was a community-based approach doing the same things we were doing, but they were more successful because of the connections they had and the trust they had.

“The ink wasn’t dry on the LEI agreement, and they were already doing after-school programs to prepare students for the MCAS.”

CHAPTER 4

Success and Belonging

LEP’S academic outcomes are impressive. A 100% of its high school participants graduate, 80% enroll in college, and 100% of the Worcester State sophomores it serves continue into their junior year, compared to 88% of all Worcester State sophomores.

Yet, those numbers do not capture some of its most enduring successes—raising self-esteem, empowering young people and giving them a sense of belonging.

“It feels like a large Latino family,” Katherine Esparza, Special Projects Manager in the city’s Division of Youth Opportunities and a former LEI participant said of the Institute.

“The staff is very thoughtful about creating a space where young people from Latinx descent have access to mentorship and professional opportunities.”

“When you are someone like me, having bi-cultural identities and having to sort through complex issues, those spaces help prevent you from not buying into the dominant narrative that thinks of you as the other.”

Elliot Rivera participated in LEI’s program during his junior and high school years, and became a staff member during and after his postsecondary schooling.

A graduate of Worcester State, he was the first male in his family on both sides to graduate with a four-year college degree.

“LEI is forever home for me,” he said.

“It’s the place that provided me with a lot of professional development. It fostered me. It let me make mistakes. It let me practice, and it let me develop.”

Kirsh Donis, a Worcester native and the coordinator African, Latino, Asian and Native American (ALANA) recruitment at Worcester State, said LEI proves that Latino parents and their children crave nurturing and challenging educational settings.

While his Guatemalan parents instilled in him the importance of a good education, “They didn’t know how to navigate the process,” he said.

“They just knew that staying out of trouble and getting into programs that would help my success later on in life were important.”

He recalled as a student getting into the Dynamy Youth Academy, formerly the John S. Laws Institute, because his mother heard about the program from another parent.

The academy, which provides qualified Worcester high school students with a five-year leadership and college preparedness enrichment course, was critical to his educational success, Mr. Donis said.

“If it weren’t for the referral from another parent to my mother, I would never have found out about the John S. Laws institute,” he said.

“That’s why parental outreach is so integral to LEI. If you educate one parent that parent can go out and recruit another parent.”

Ms. Ramirez understands from personal experience how supporting English Learners can improve those students’ academic outcomes.

A Dominican native, she came to the States when she was 10-years-old, and unable to speak English. There wasn’t a bilingual program at the time, but she was “lucky enough” to have had a Latina teacher who helped her with her English proficiency, she said.

Within four months, she was speaking the language. By her third year she was at the top of her class in speaking, reading and writing.

Her siblings, who were taught in English immersion classrooms, didn’t fair, as well, she said.

“As a student who had to work hard to catch up, I understand the needs of our families and how important it is to learn English while maintaining our culture and language,” she said.

“LEI’s programs do a great job of this with programs that have strong elements of identity and culture and bilingualism.”

“The staff is very thoughtful about creating a space where young people from Latinx descent have access to mentorship and professional opportunities.”

CHAPTER 5

Higher Learning

It's impossible to overstate the role Worcester State played in the founding and maintenance of the Institute.

A mere three years after it opened, LEI's first Executive Director, Maria Del Rio, said one her goals was to have the Worcester State student population be at least 10% Latino.

At the time, Latinos accounted for 3% of the enrollment. But Janelle Ashley, who replaced Mr. Ghosh as president in 2002, cemented the university's commitment by concurring with Ms. Del Rio. The 10% goal, she said, was "certainly possible."

Today, Latino students make up 10.1% of the Worcester State student population.

Still, the Institute and the university have a broader vision of raising college enrollment, with LEI being a lead agent of that growth, according to Worcester State President Barry Maloney.

Worcester State, for example, extended LEI's role and reach.

The Institute currently has branches in Southbridge and Springfield and continues to expand. The university is also using LEI as an integral player in its broader educational goals.

"Over the past 10 years, we have been working on further integration of LEI within Worcester State to help strengthen what they do, using the faculty and student talent that we have on campus to help with program implementation," Mr. Maloney said.

Importantly, according to Mr. Maloney, LEI is complimenting its services with community research. "This switched us from being solely a support organization to an organization that assesses its work and, even further, researches problems that LEI and the staff here can help solve."

Increasing the college enrollment rate of Latino students is a primary LEI goal, Mr. Maloney said. As an example, he pointed to LEI's selection by the Balfour Foundation and Boston Foundation to lead a statewide research into the college readiness of Latino males.

Among its findings, the study found that 67% of Latino males who make it to college do not make it past their first year.

"Being involved in such research at the state level has been a new vein of work for LEI, and was done on the reputation we have built over 20 years," Mr. Maloney said.

EPILOGUE

While many of the adversities faced by Latino students 20 years ago still linger, LEI is proving that those challenges are not insurmountable, its supporters say.

More importantly, LEI stands as a compelling counter narrative to the harmful and persistent view that poor and minority students are destined to be low academic achievers, according to Ms. Ramirez.

"In working with Latino students, it is so important that educators understand that our students want to do well, and that their families have great aspirations," she said.

"All they need are the tools and motivation and for us to meet them where they are. Just like my own story, our students will rise and reach their full potential if you take time in the early years to support them where they need it the most.

"They have so much to offer. Their solutions are practical and simple. We all need to do more to ensure we understand their needs and that we adapt our programs to meet those needs." ♦

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these amazing
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A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Isalby Juveny Martinez

LEI Parent and Family Educator

Isalby's strong advocacy for the Latino Education Institute stems from her personal experiences with many of LEI's signature programs—as the mother of children in the afterschool programs, as a participant in family outreach efforts to demystify the Worcester Public Schools (WPS) and now as a staff member helping with the summer youth program in Southbridge.

The mother of three settled in Worcester 14 years ago from her native Dominican Republic. Shortly after arriving, her oldest son participated in the ISLA (Innovative Services for Latino Achievers) afterschool program at Chandler Magnet, which provided him with fun activities to improve his English,

learn more about the Spanish language, and connect with other Latino students from other schools.

Now her youngest, 11-year old Ciarra, is enjoying the LASO afterschool program for sixth grade girls at Woodland Street Academy. "That's a particularly tough age for girls, but the way they learn is fun and she really enjoys that time."

She also participated in the WIPLE (Worcester Institute for Parent Leadership in Education) program, a collaboration between LEI and the WPS to help Latino families understand grades, testing, and the public school system in general.

"When you come here from another country, you think the system is the same, and often

it's not. You don't have the information you need to help your child navigate the system. WIPLE gives you the tools to have a conversation with a teacher. It helps you to know your rights as a parent so your child will get the best education," she adds. Martinez is now working in Southbridge as an aide to the summer camp facilitator, where she helps to connect with students in the Reader's Theatre activities. "I am pleased and grateful for the opportunity given to me to enhance my professional skills as a Latina," she adds. ♦

OUR IMPACT



2,800
FAMILIES
served



150
ADULTS
in ESL programs



768
K-12 STUDENTS
in signature programs



100%
of 12TH GRADE
PARTICIPANTS
enrolled in college



768
K-12 STUDENTS served in
three communities

94%

of Latina Achievers in Search of Success (LASOS) participants reported that they understand cultural traditions.

100%

of LASOS participants shared that they have positive role models.

88%

of LASOS participants know what it means to be in a healthy relationship.

80%

of Encouraging Latinos to Achieve Excellence (ENLACE) participants learned that working together requires compromising.

93%

of ENLACE participants reported that they feel supported by their community.

90%

of Latinos Involved in Discovering Educational Resources (LIDER) participants understand what requirements are needed to attend college.

100%

of Youth Civics Union (YCU) participants agree that they follow through with their goals.

Latino Education Institute

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The Latino Education Institute is proud of the 20 stories we are highlighting for our anniversary, but these are just a few! We have so many more to share and celebrate.



Ziray De Jesus

Worcester State University '24

Pronouns: They/Them

Ziray is very active in their community, they are currently a Get Real Teen Council Facilitator with Planned Parenthood. They have also participated in various LEI programs in their beginning high school years including Youth Civics Union (YCU), the Latinos Involved in Discovering Educational Resources (LIDER) 2020 Cohort, and is currently finishing up their first Early College course, SO 299: Latinx Sociology at Worcester State, provided by the LEI. They are always looking for ways to stay engaged and support their community and this year, in doing so, were able to attend an event at the Massachusetts State House, advocating for Early College course funding. Ziray is planning to start their college career at Worcester State University this fall.

"The LEI helped me shape my personality into what it is today by providing emotional and academic support. They stood by me every day since 7th grade and always gave me opportunities to join different programs. Joining the LIDER program and an Early College Course were one of the best decisions of my life! The LEI are part of my family and have always helped me strive to be the best version of myself! Speaking out for what feels right to me is one of the biggest lessons I've learned, and I am so happy that they chose me to speak at the State House briefing for Early College, it was a huge honor!" ♦



Katherine Esparza

Clark University '15 and '16

Katherine Esparza, a native from Quito, Ecuador, came to Worcester when she was 16. At the time, she spoke very little English. Her parents spoke none at all. Today, Ms. Esparza holds a bachelor's degree in international development and social change from Clark University and a postgraduate certificate in youth development work from Clark University.

From subsidizing her TOEFL exams (which evaluates the English proficiency of people who are non-native English speakers), walking her through the college application and enrollment process, to providing her the space to be herself, LEI was instrumental in her success, Ms. Esparza said. "I always say I am a product of youth development work," she said. "I truly believe that if I didn't have all the youth empowerment training from LEI and other agencies in the city, I wouldn't have had the support I needed to survive and succeed."

Ms. Esparza recalled her younger brother entering middle school, and spending the year in the wrong math class. No one detected the error until the end of the year when her brother received a failing grade for not attending the class to which he was assigned. "My parents and I didn't know how to navigate the system," she said. "They didn't speak English. I spoke some, but nothing close to what you actually need to survive."

Brown and black kids are often marginalized, disenfranchised, so learning how to navigate the system and having people who look like those students are huge factors in their mental health and resilience. "We (in the mainstream school community) don't have teachers that look like us. We don't have an

administration that looks like us, or too many people who are listening to our demands and needs. Having folks who can nurture you, care, and make you feel that you matter is really huge."

She pointed to LEI staff member Kathy Orengo as someone who was always there for her, and everyone else. "She is a real auntie," she said. Like many LEI student participants, Ms. Esparza returned to the Institute as a staff member during and after her postsecondary training. She spoke, for example, about her time working with English as Second Language students at Burncoat and Worcester East Middle, and how that experience led her to press city officials on combating homelessness and increasing youth services in the city.

Ms. Esparza said she is particularly pleased with LEI's gender-specific programming and its emphasis on creating space for young people to learn, grow and express their feelings. "A lot of times in our society, we really devalue how much young people are critical thinkers, and we don't create enough opportunities for them to be that," she said. "That's what makes LEI special. There are a lot of people who are deeply committed to young people. They work really hard to make sure there are opportunities for young people to take a lead role in fashioning their futures." ♦



Crystal Fernandez-Duval

Worcester State University '24

Crystal, a senior at Worcester Technical High School, was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in Spain. She moved to the United States during her middle school years.

At her high school she has studied a trade for the last four years; Finance and Marketing, in which she was able to develop marketing, promotional, and banking skills. She used those skills to create two campaigns: a bullying awareness and pollution awareness campaign, two of things she is most passionate about informing her community about. These campaigns are still ongoing at her school, as the faculty and staff have decided to continue the campaigns with the help of each entering first year class.

In continuing her education, Crystal has decided to take on a new journey and learn new skills by enrolling at Worcester State University and majoring in Business. ♦



Lexie Gaitho

Worcester Tech '19

Lexie will be attending Regis College this fall and hopes to work towards becoming a dentist and owning her own practice. She chose Regis College, as they invited her to participate in their Dental Hygiene Preview days, and then realized that this higher education institution would help to get her where she wanted to be. During her time at Regis College, she hopes to become an active part of her school community by joining the American Sign Language (ASL) Club to better associate herself with those who are deaf and learn to better communicate with the deaf community. Diversity, inclusion and representation are also important to Lexie, she states "I would like to participate in the Black Student Union and I would like to understand and connect with others of African descent like me. Being able to understand people's backgrounds, including my own...makes me feel I will better connect with people in college." ♦



Maria Fernanda Fernandez

Doherty Memorial High School '19

Maria immigrated from Venezuela in late 2018 with no knowledge of the English language. At first she struggled with feeling out of place but soon found community at her school through different activities such as joining the Kindness and Knitting Clubs. Joining these clubs have helped her improve her English language skills. Since arriving from Venezuela, she knew that attending college would be a challenge but also an endeavor and accomplishment very important to her and her family. Maria Fernanda has been accepted to Southern New Hampshire University, Worcester State University, Quinsigamond Community College, Niagara University, and Framingham State University. She plans to pursue a career in hospitality and tourism management. ♦

"The LEI helped me shape my personality into what it is today by providing emotional and academic support."

-Ziray De Jesus



Erika Guaman

Worcester State University '23

Erica was still in high school when she took her first college class, an opportunity made possible through the Worcester State-Worcester Public School dual enrollment program.

The bright, ambitious teenager loved the academic challenge, but found the biggest adjustment was in the expectations of the faculty. "They give you the whole syllabus for the year, and expect you to do the assignments," she says. "The teachers don't tell you what to do for homework. You have to be responsible. You have to use your time wisely."

Succeeding in those classes gave Guaman confidence that she can handle the demands of a college curriculum when she became an official Worcester State student last fall. She also participated in the Alternatives for Individual Development (AID) program this past summer—a six-week boot camp of sorts that helps incoming first-generation and underrepresented minorities adjust to college.

Guaman's ambitions were nurtured at an early age through several different Latino Education Institute programs. A native of Ecuador whose family moved to Spain when she was two years old, Guaman had no English language skills when she arrived in Worcester in the seventh grade.

In middle school she participated in My Voice, My Community, an experiential learning program which explores what it means to be a Latino youth in Worcester. As a freshman at North High School, she learned how to prepare for college in Latinos Involved in Discovering Educational Resources (LIDER). She

advocated for change in schools as a member of the Youth Civics Union. And as a participant in LEI's Youth Summit, she and a friend offered workshops on academic success strategies to younger kids in middle school. Even her mother improved her English in the adult Club E classes for English language learners. She paid that help forward as a volunteer in Teen Circle for middle schoolers, where she acted as a mentor to other Latino youth. "They have questions about what it is like in high school. I tell them you have to put in a lot of effort, but if you put in a lot of effort, you'll get into a good college," she says. Some girls will ask her advice on a social problem, perhaps with another girl they are having issues with. "I tell them, ignore them and focus on college." ♦



Jaycie Jauregu

Worcester State University '21

Jaycie Jauregui was only in the fifth grade when she first learned about the LEI. Her mother had encouraged her to follow her sister to an after school program; the Latina Achievers in Search of Success (LASOS) program. As she entered the room, she was welcomed by all the girls and staff members. She immediately felt like she belonged. Jaycie began to be interested in the programs the LEI had to offer.

"I thought I would have a lot of fun," Jaycie explained. "[The staff] stayed in touch with my mom. When I finished the 6th grade, they reached out to me to join Teen Circle." Before she knew it, Jaycie's life had changed dramatically. LASOS provided her with her first experience on a college campus, and later on she joined Teen Circle, another LEI program. In high school, she joined our LIDER program. When she spoke with

her parents about life after high school, they did not know how to help her. LIDER became a place to answer all her questions about college and beyond.

“My mindset on college really opened up. [LASOS] was why I decided to go to college,” Jaycie stated. “The staff taught us a lot about college through sharing their experiences and taking us on tours of college campuses like Worcester State.”

With her newfound motivation, Jaycie decided to join the LIDER program which assisted her with her college applications. She now attends Worcester State University and is currently in her third year. After thorough consideration, Jaycie declared her major in biology with a track in pre-med to prepare her in her journey to becoming a pediatrician.

Through all the support she received from the LEI, Jaycie was ready to give back. Jaycie spoke to Kathy Orenge, the LEI Program Manager, about any openings available to her. Kathy recommended her to LASOS, where she now works as an Academic Assistant. “The LEI becomes an escape for a lot of kids,” Jaycie shared. “It gives them a chance to talk about their futures and make plans for success regardless of the hardships they endure. It really helps these kids grow.” ♦



Shannen Jiménez

South High Community School '19

Shannen will be graduating from South High Community School this year and plans to continue her education at one of the various universities here in Worcester, Massachusetts. Throughout her high school years, Shannen has always been very involved in her community. She has engaged in diverse extracurricular

activities, such as a human resources internship at Fallon Health, the Girls INC. Eureka! Program, and the LEI's LIDER Program, among many more. After thorough consideration about her career goals and future endeavors, Shannen ultimately decided to pursue a degree in nursing. She wants to follow in her mother's footsteps, who is a nurse and who has encouraged her and supported her with the college application process. She hopes to work as a nurse in her community to provide people with quality health care, something she notes is lacking. ♦



Jessenia Kolaco

Youth Civics Union '20

Jessenia Kolaco, presently a senior at Claremont Academy, has been exposed to a variety of public service platforms through her family's commitment to community service and civic engagements within the city of Worcester. She was nurtured to believe her actions, her voice, and her presence are all vital parts of her generation's future.

Jessenia recently delivered an impassioned speech on the open-air podium at Worcester City Hall on behalf of our youth here in the city and across the country during “March for Our Lives” against gun violence, a nationwide march that included over 2,000 citizens and students of Worcester.

Jessenia was born and raised in Worcester. Her mother, Jessica Reyes-Carrion, is a 3rd generation Puerto Rican, born in Bronx, NY, and also raised in Worcester. Her Father Rudolf Kolaco, born in Monrovia, Liberia, Africa, resettled in Worcester at the age of 12.

Being born into a well-rooted family that has overcome many obstacles while sustaining its heritage has brought with it an understanding of what it is to be culturally different from those around her. Jessenia's parents encourage her to work hard in school and to become civically involved in her community. When you ask Jessenia "How are you involved in your community?", she answers "Well not much" a humble answer to a way of life that has become second nature.

Jessenia is an active member of Christian Community Church, a congregation involved in stewardship that focuses on baseline concerns within our community, standing firm on civic engagement, racial justice and equality for all. Since her mother and step-father are leaders and youth ministers in the church, Jessenia has been unknowingly involved in serving her community since the age of eight. She states: "I thought that is what everyone does and, is required to do. I didn't think of it as service to my community."

Today, Jessenia is an active volunteer for the Elizabeth Warren for State Senator Campaign, is a canvass volunteer for City Council Sarai Rivera and loves to mentor her peers. She has a passion for music and art. She is an honor student, enrolled in Advanced Placement courses at Claremont Academy while dually attending Clark University. She is fluent in American Sign Language and plays volleyball both in school and for a regional club traveling outside of the city. ♦



Viana Mercedes

Worcester State University '16, M.S '18

The LEI was the first place where I felt I truly belonged after migrating to Worcester in 2005. My heart had

been longing for a community in those past 6 years and I didn't understand that's what I was missing. I grew up in a tight-knit neighborhood and had been missing the warmth and care that comes from such community. Joining the LEI family in 2011 helped me connect back to my culture, refine my identity, have a group of people who cared for my mental health, and support me financially through work study opportunities and the George F. and Sybil H. Fuller Foundation scholarship.

Today, I work at the Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE). In this role, I focus on the development, coordination, and implementation of technical assistance, training opportunities and research support relating to youth organizing, leadership and voice for organizations, and school districts working towards education equity throughout New England.

I think there's power in the intergenerational work that happens at the LEI. The team at the LEI always thinks of how the whole family can be integrated in their programming and events. At the LEI, there are opportunities to provide programming targeting different age groups and, in some cases, bringing the groups together and teaching families how to have important conversations in their own households. I think that's impactful. A lot of times we forget that when a family migrates to a new country, the young person is not the only one going through the big changes—the parents also face big cultural shifts. The LEI teaches families about bi-culturalism and provides a resource where families can be supported to navigate this new culture and systems which ultimately can really shape and frame the development of the young people in the family.

The LEI was one of my first stepping stools in community work. I was introduced to the basics of leading sessions, using my platform, and being organized in my work. Having experienced being both a student and a staff member at the Latino Education Institute is part of what has shaped my work in the past years. ♦



Isabel Muniz
Worcester State University '10

I found out about the LEI when I was a senior at South High (2005). I signed up for LEI's LIDER program. I was part of upward bound at Worcester State but was interested in trying another program as well. The LEI became an extended family for me. When I began Worcester State in 2005 I wanted to help Elsa Rivera with the LIDER program so I started volunteering. The next year I qualified for work study so I did my work study at the LEI. The years after that I was hired and paid to work from grants. I helped in programs from LIDER to LASOS in various capacities.

In 2010, when I had just completed my bachelor's in community health, Elsa was taking a position in the Worcester Public Schools and I was asked to coordinate a program LIDER and One Circle. I worked at the LEI until September 2017 when I took a position in the Worcester Public Schools.

I believe the LEI has seen me grow personally and professionally. It was a place I could always go to as a student. I was given so many opportunities in the years I was involved with the LEI. I was able to take the CLEP test in Spanish and receive credits. I traveled and was able to attend workshops and training that helped me get knowledge and grow as a professional. Coordinating LIDER was personal for me, as it helped me. The program touched on many points that are important in the college process such as award letters, scholarships, grants, answering questions my parents had and visiting other campuses. As a student I received the Fuller Scholarships that is from the LEI a couple times. I have met so many students through the programs that I still run into them occasionally. It's

always nice to see them grown up and see what they are doing in life now. I am the youngest of four siblings and the first to receive a bachelor's. I truly believe having been a part of the LEI helped me successfully complete my bachelor's. ♦



Claudia Oliveira De Paiva
Worcester State University '22

20 years of Latino Education Institute! 20 years, 20 stories! Thanks to the Latino Education Institute, I'm here today to gladly share my story with you.

My father once told me that education is the highest kite I could fly. I have had that embedded in my mind since I was a little girl. For many, many years, it has been my hope, and dream to conclude my academic studies in the United States. Education is in fact a lovely kite I am still flying relentlessly. Truly, if it weren't for the LEI, I couldn't have possibly imagined, I would have come this far...

Long ago, I discovered a vocation and passion for education. I have been volunteering, teaching Languages & Arts to children with autism, Down Syndrome, intellectual disabilities, low vision, and mobility challenges for countless years. I am on a mission to fight for all children's rights. I am on a mission to promote inclusion, increase accessibility in special education, and to improve students' academic achievements, especially among underrepresented minorities. As a Latina myself, I must confess, those have not been easy missions. How wonderful it is to feel that I am not walking on this path alone. LEI and I share the same sense of responsibility!

Last summer, I was really fortunate to be engaged

in a literacy program in Southbridge. Seeing all those children eager to learn, made me realize even more that I am indeed, walking on the right path. I want to inspire, and encourage all children to fly the kite of education!

Throughout my journey as an international student at Worcester State University pursuing a master's degree, not only has LEI nurtured, motivated, and supported me academically and professionally, but most importantly, affectively. Today now, more than ever, I want to build bridges instead of walls... Walking side by side with the LEI, I have faith, we will build the LAIS—Latino African-American Institute Special! Once I focused on becoming an ambassador to fight for EQUITY, I have never deviated from my goal! I have recently made a bet with my son: let's throw our graduation caps up in the air! Let's graduate together! Unquestionably, LEI has made our future a possible, and achievable dream. I can't wait for my son to share his story in the 30th year LEI celebration! I might have been a member of the Latino Education Institute for just, and only one year, but it wholeheartedly feels I've been a part of this incredible family for 20 years. Thank you very much! Obrigada! Muchas Gracias LEI! HAPPY 20 YEARS ! FELIZ 20 ANOS! ♦



Agustina Pedroza

LIDER '20

Agustina is a senior at University Park Campus School and will be starting her first year of college at Worcester State University. She plans on focusing her studies in biotechnology and hopes to work in labs. Agustina has divided her time into many different passions

throughout her high school years. She has worked a summer job at UMASS Medical School, was a student poll worker, and is an active member of her church. Currently, Agustina is involved in programs that help tutor Latinx youth and expand their passions. She will be a first-generation college student, who hopes to continue mentoring youth, especially those who are mainly Spanish speakers throughout her college years. ♦



Alexandra Pizarro

Worcester State University '22

"The water was coming in really hard all over my room. I stepped out of bed and there was three inches of water on the floor." -Alexandra Pizarro

When hurricane Maria smashed into Puerto Rico in the pre-dawn hours of Sept. 20, 2017, Alexandra Pizarro was still asleep. It was the ferocious, wind-driven rain coming in between the panes of the casement windows that woke her up. "I touched my face and it was wet," she says. "I was, like, 'What's this?' The water was coming in really hard all over my room. I stepped out of bed and there was three inches of water on the floor." She shook her sister awake and they ran to the living room, where other family members had already begun to gather. "They were all huddled together with candles and praying," she says.

In the sunny calm that followed the hurricane, she could see that her ordeal was far from over. The island had been devastated and its 3.4 million residents faced a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. Like many others throughout Puerto Rico, Pizarro's family chose to leave the island as the months wore on with deteriorating conditions and no help in sight. They had

relatives in Worcester, so they came here. Worcester State University's Latino Education Institute (LEI) had been reaching out to help Hurricane Maria evacuees coming into the city and connected with Pizarro and her family.

She now is a second-semester student at Worcester State, and also works part-time at LEI. ♦



Maria Belen Portero **Intensive English Language Institute**

Maria Belen arrived at the LEI recommended by the Intensive English Language Institute at Worcester State University. She came to the United States after completing a bachelor's in civil engineering in Ecuador. Her goal is to learn English to attend a master's program in Civil Engineering in the United States. "LEI has allowed me to collaborate with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. This opportunity has given me the chance to work as a team which consistently supports the Latino/Latinx community. Through this work, I have been able to improve my skills with working English and Spanish since being bilingual opens many doors to new opportunities." ♦

"I truly believe having been a part of the LEI helped me successfully complete my bachelor's."

-Isabel Muniz



Elliot Rivera **Worcester State University**

Elliot Rivera is the Executive Director of Youth In Action, a young people self-empowerment organization on the South Side of Providence, Rhode Island. "It's a dream job made possible by my Worcester roots, particularly by my association with the Latino Education Institute as both a student and an instructor," he said. "When you are a high performing student, there are accelerated programs for you," he noted. "If you are a low performer, there are remedial programs for you. But if you are in the middle, like I was, there is nothing for you. Nobody has time for you. Nobody was helping me achieve to the next level. Then came LEI, and everything changed for me."

Mr. Rivera has two associate's degrees in the arts and criminal justice from Quinsigamond Community College and a bachelor's of science in psychology from Worcester State. He was the first male in his family on both sides to graduate with a four-year degree.

Looking back on his early educational years, Mr. Rivera, who grew up on Bell Hill, could hardly have predicted the academic and career success he has achieved. His El Salvadorian parents, like most immigrants, worked long hours and weren't able to offer him the extracurricular resources that he knew other children were receiving. Although Belmont Street Community School was closest to his home, he said he was bused to Lake View as part of the school system de-isolation plan at the time.

"I am surrounded by all these white students who live within walking distance of the school, and I'm busing and I don't have the same resources as

them,” he recalled. “All my friends had parents that understood the system and who helped them with their school work. I’m not saying my parents didn’t help. My parents did their best, but it was hard when my dad was working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and my mom was working from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. My dad comes home from work; he wants to eat dinner and go to bed. And then I wouldn’t see my mom except for a moment before she goes to work, and then she comes back at 10 p.m., and I’m starting to fall asleep. So, it was really hard for us. I struggled a lot, and this is not even taking into account all the social and cultural barriers. Elementary school was a hard time.”

It wasn’t until he entered North High School that he found his footing. “What I like about North was that diversity was really a thing,” he said. “All the student body really owned it and loved it. There were some administrators and teachers who were oppositional to a lot of things, because it didn’t make sense to them. “But there were a good number of voices that would fight back, and I think that culture still exists at North High.”

In his junior year, he responded to a flyer promising a gift certificate and pizza if he would spend about an hour learning about support services for students his age. He went and made the acquaintances of two LEI staff members, Elsa Rivera and Kirsh Donis. “They were super welcoming and super nice to me, and it was what kept me attracted to the LEI,” he said. “They supported me on a number of things, and I helped them with events. I was their youth speaker. They were like another connection that I never had.”

Later on Elliot was hired at LEI to work as a facilitator of Encouraging Latinos to Achieve Excellence (ENLACE), a program for boys that fosters self-discipline, a love of learning and an understanding of one’s culture and community.

“I am a champion now for nonprofits like LEI because they are able to work with people in real ways that aren’t bogged down by the rest of society. “That’s how LEI develop incredible youth and staff.” ♦



Michel Salazar

Worcester State University '24

My name is Michel Salazar, and I was born on the fourth of July in 2002 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Being the oldest daughter of my family of five means that I hold the responsibility of setting the best example of myself—being the first generation Mexican-American woman pursuing higher education—for my younger sisters. One can say that it seemed as if I were the American dream born to be! After all, most of my greatest achievements have rooted from my academic years attending University Park Campus School and my involvement with the Latino Education Institute! LEI has helped me identify myself as a strong Latina woman through civic engagement, programs in education and through providing valuable relationships. Here, I was able explore my mother tongue, Spanish, and the English language, all while learning about what it means to be bi-cultural and learning from both my traditional Mexican family values and American ideals. ♦

“LEI has allowed me to collaborate with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences.”

-Maria Belen Portero



Christian Santana

Worcester State University '21

As a 7th grader, new to the community and originally from Puerto Rico, Christian Santana didn't want to join the LEI's ENLACE program.

"I didn't speak any English and it was my first year in Worcester." Ultimately, following the recommendation of his Math teacher, Christian started to regularly attend ENLACE, and he would do so for two years. He built meaningful relationships with the program's facilitators. One facilitator, Eric Batista, played a role in changing Christian's life. "Even when I would get in trouble out in the community, he would come up to me and talk to me. He'd tell me to be different from the rest." This relationship impacted Christian significantly and influenced the choices he continued to make for years to come.

Now a facilitator for ENLACE, Christian hopes to have the same impact on the youth he works with. "Even though you don't know the students closely, you know everyone has something going on. You need to find a way to connect with the students." His experiences with the LEI and ENLACE have also changed the way he looks at education as a profession. "I strive to be a teacher and mentor to the students I'll eventually work with."

Christian participated in LEI's first ENLACE cohort from 2011 to 2013. Now a sophomore at Worcester State University, Christian is studying to become an educator with a major in Spanish and a minor in Education. This year, Christian has also come full-circle in his experience with ENLACE. Once a youth participant, he is now a facilitator in the LEI's latest ENLACE launch at Forest Grove Middle School and helped us launch a program in Southbridge Middle School. ♦



Daniel Triana

Worcester State University '18

Daniel understands the power of a phone call. For his job as a family liaison in the Southbridge Public Schools, he calls parents to check in when their children are absent from school, to help solve a problem, or to invite them to an event explaining resources available to keep their child on the right track. And if a phone call is not enough, he'll make a visit to their home. Often that personal touch, the fact that someone is reaching out to make a connection, makes a difference in securing parents as allies in raising the educational sights of their students.

"I like working with families and seeing the importance of that phone call and the impact it can make," says Triana, whose Spanish fluency helps him communicate with families in Southbridge, a city with a 46 percent Latino population. "At this year's eighth grade graduation ceremony, lots of parents there knew me and that was a good feeling. I always wanted to have a job where I can make an impact, and this is definitely one of those jobs."

The son of Mexican immigrants who settled in Westborough, Mass., 15 years ago, Triana understands the stresses encountered by families navigating a new culture, and how one caring person can effect a young person's direction in life. He credits his high school guidance counselor with filling the gaps in his knowledge as a first-generation college student. "I got myself into college because my parents didn't know about the process. Even then, I felt like I was always a few steps behind. I want to use what I learned to help other students in similar situations," he says.

After graduation, the business major continued to work for LEI in a summer program for Worcester youth, and then was one of the first people hired when LEI expanded its services to Southbridge in the fall of 2018.

In addition to his role as a family facilitator during the academic year, he now coordinates the summer program in Southbridge, a free camp that provides transportation, food, and activities that are both fun and educational. "Now there is something for kids to do, both after school and in the summer, and it's all free. That's a big plus for the community," he says. ♦



Jenny Velez

Worcester State University '15

I heard about LEI while in my history class when a staff came to speak about the mission of the LEI and connecting within the community. They talked about needing volunteers. It was my first semester on campus, and there was a very limited Latinx community and I wanted to feel connected to Worcester State.

During my first year, LEI helped me truly become engaged and helped connect me to the community, learn more about my own identity and helped me develop professional and personal skills. LEI helped me explore how I can become more engaged and give back to my community by connecting with role models, becoming engaged and giving me opportunities to grow in different programs all while feeling connected to Worcester State where it was isolating being in classrooms where I was the only Latina. LEI provided that space where I can connect

with others and at the same time learn from role models, how community engagement works, and how the nonprofit field works. On top of all that, I was able to work with the youth which helped me in my professional work and help start my career.

I am currently in graduate school seeking my master's in international education management at Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, California. After a few years of working with the youth and with diverse populations, I am seeking to return to working with underrepresented and marginalized groups to help bring study abroad opportunities to them and work with diverse populations. My long-term goal is to continue learning and adapting my work with diverse populations and to make a positive impact within my community, wherever I am.

LEI helped begin my profession by working with marginalized, underrepresented groups giving me the skills to build relationships with others, building my Spanish skills, developing skills on networking, communication, coordinating programs, becoming a better educator, helping envision my future and possibilities all while being fulfilled in the work. Thank you LEI, Hilda and Kathy for being great mentors. My time there truly helped me learn more about myself and I can't thank you enough for the growth and opportunities you have provided me. ♦

“LEI helped me truly become engaged and helped connect me to the community, learn more about my own identity and helped me develop professional and personal skills.”

-Jenny Velez



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OUR MISSION:

Improving the academic achievement and well-being of Latino students (grades K-16) and their families from the city of Worcester.

The Latino Education Institute (LEI) at Worcester State University was created in response to a call to action by the Worcester Working Coalition for Latino Students. The coalition—a grassroots effort representing community and elected leaders, concerned parents, and educators—outlined strategies to improve educational outcomes for Latino students. Today, the LEI engages over 2,500 Latino families and youth in programming and initiatives aimed at college and career preparation, identity and cultural enrichment, and civic engagement. We work to ensure that youth and families celebrate their cultural assets, grow academically and in life, and advocate for themselves.





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