

Culturally competent counseling for Latino/Hispanic clients: lessons learned from an ATS Innovation Grant

BY STEPHANIE RAMIREZ

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In the midst of a needs assessment initiative by one of the full-time counseling faculty members, the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, discovered a growing need for affordable, culturally relevant, and spiritually integrated mental healthcare for Latino/Hispanic individuals and their families in the state of Texas. The Latino/Hispanic Counseling Concentration emerged from this need to bridge the gap for Latinos/Hispanic to access mental healthcare.

Identifying a need

Currently, 10.4 million of the Latinos living in the United States reside in Texas, according to a 2016 report by Pew Research Center. A 2017 report by the American Psychiatric Association reveals that approximately one in ten Hispanics with a mental disorder use mental health services from a general health care provider, while only one in 20 receive such services from a mental health specialist. While this disparity is based on many factors, several studies have found that bilingual patients are evaluated

differently when interviewed in English as opposed to Spanish, resulting in Latinos/Hispanics being more frequently undertreated.

With this in mind, the Seminary of the Southwest felt it important to equip counseling students to work with this population in a way that responds to their cultural needs.

The new Latino/Hispanic Counseling Concentration

With the support of an ATS Innovation Grant—part of the Educational Models and Practices project—the seminary developed a Latino/Hispanic Counseling Concentration (LHCC) within the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program. In keeping with its mission to form women and men for the service of God in the church and in the world, the vision of the concentration is to train curious, culturally empathic, accepting, self-aware counselors. The seminary counseling faculty aspires to prepare students to provide clinically competent counseling services to the Latino/Hispanic Community in Austin and surrounding areas.



LHCC students walk along the Rio Grande during a recent trip to Laredo, Texas. The ATS grant helped fund the trip for students to meet with several agencies that work toward meeting the mental health needs for populations in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean.

The program sought (1) to promote Spanish language proficiency, (2) to provide access to a field expert to teach theories beyond the traditional ones learned in the classroom, and (3) to ensure bilingual/bicultural supervision as students moved into their clinical field experiences.

The language proficiency goal is addressed by providing students access to language learning library resources and a Spanish language conversation group as well as the option of attending a language institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The seminary also connects students to a field expert to help

learn research-based culturally appropriate counseling theories to work with Latino/Hispanics. And a bilingual/bicultural field

supervisor is also available for those students entering their practicum/internship experiences. The program

“The educational, financial, and professional support has encouraged me to begin the journey of learning Spanish, dive into immersive Latino cultural experiences, and develop relevant counseling skills. Today, I am interning as a student counselor at an agency that primarily serves Latinos and even providing therapy for a Spanish-speaking client. Sometimes I pinch myself and ask myself if this is real. This wouldn’t have been possible without the LHCC program.”

also subsidizes annual cultural plunge/immersion experiences.

Long-term, through state-wide recruiting, the program hopes to add five additional students per year in the Latino/Hispanic Counseling Concentration.

Building the program

The primary activity we engaged in while developing this concentration was making sure that our students had a solid foundation both in gaining knowledge and through experiential learning. The concentration is made up of six components, including a differentiated curriculum, a workshop on culturally responsive counseling theories, language

proficiency, community collaboration, a cultural plunge/immersion component, and engagement in a field experience. In the curriculum, we designated ten potential courses where we included alternate assignments related to Latino/Hispanic population. The differentiated curriculum included research papers, group presentations, and role-plays. A field expert was hired to hold workshops on culturally appropriate counseling theories; students were provided funds, library resources, and a monthly Spanish conversation group for Spanish proficiency; a field expert was hired for the purpose of supervising students in their

field experience; and partnerships were established for the community collaboration project.

Innovative features

The most exciting aspect of implementing

—Student

this concentration was exploring the different ways we could help our students learn and immerse themselves

in another culture. Students had the opportunity to go on a trip called *Encuentro*, where they traveled to Laredo, Texas, to learn about the sociopolitical experience for the Latino/Hispanic community. Students were also able to observe counseling in Spanish and learn about the barriers for Latinos/Hispanics to access mental health services. In addition to the *Encuentro* trip, a relationship with a Spanish language institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico, was established for those students needing extra language support. Lastly, we initiated a monthly Spanish conversation group that resulted in creating a course this fall called *Lectura y Pláctica: Latin American Literatures and Spiritualities*.

Lessons learned

We come away from the project with some general observations that are relevant both to our seminary and to other ATS schools:

- We learned that there is interest in this type of program. Initially we had two pilot students, but once the concentration was fully implemented and announced, ten students demonstrated interest and seven were accepted, with an additional three accepted for the 2018–2019 academic year. We will continue to explore how to increase recruitment for students.
- We learned that there is a huge need for the Latino/Hispanic community to receive mental health services. Although we were aware of the need due to current research, we didn't understand the full extent of the need until we began connecting with community partners. This confirmed that the LHCC was necessary to equip our students to meet the need in the Latino/Hispanic community.

- We learned that there is often a stigma attached to seeking mental health care in Latino/Hispanic communities. One path to reducing the barriers to seeking care was to reach out to community partners for referrals. We found that first or second generation Latino/Hispanic clients who do attend counseling often do so based on recommendations from trusted people (priest/pastor, family member, general physician). The stigma of seeking mental health counseling seems to lessen in the third or fourth generation.
- We learned that students' language needs and cultural understanding are best served by immersion/plunge experiences but that we have to have alternative modes of learning available for students unable to participate in these experiences. We will continue to explore alternative models of language learning for our students.

The ATS Innovation Grant was crucial in the development of our concentration. It provided the seminary the means to fund language resources, hire a consultant, contract with a bilingual/bicultural supervisor, and support student immersion trips. Equally important, it connected us with other ATS grantee schools who are engaged in innovative programs.

For more information on the Latino/Hispanic Counseling Concentration (LHCC), please email [Stephanie Ramirez](mailto:Stephanie.Ramirez@ats.edu) or visit our [website](http://www.ats.edu/lhcc).

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Stephanie Ramirez is Assistant Professor of Counselor Education at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas.