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Conversatorios about Inequality and Social Mobility in the Latino Community **Analytical Summary**

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Introduction

OLLAS has been reporting on the socio-economic characteristics of Latinos in Omaha and the state of Nebraska for a number of years. For about the past two years, OLLAS and other community organizations have shared concerns about the barriers that may block the full deployment of this population's talents and abilities, and their full and equitable integration into the city of Omaha. Some of us have felt an urgency to improve or hasten the pace of programs, public policies, and expertise needed to achieve such integration. Keeping this broader set of concerns in mind, while fulfilling our shorter-term organizational goals, could avert a repeat of a well-documented pattern whereby educational achievement and social mobility for Mexicans and Latinos as a whole tend to slow down by the third generation.

In order to explore these concerns we proposed to organize a series of conversations (*conversatorios*) with proportionate participation of Latinos at the grassroots and in leadership positions. Eventually, these conversations were to be extended to include a wider array of stakeholders from the larger community. The goals of these conversations were twofold. First, we wanted to begin to forge consensus around agendas for social change in the community. Specifically, there was a desire to increase awareness of, and a critical consciousness around, issues of inequity and poverty. Second, we wanted to begin to visualize a comprehensive community plan or road map which rested on that collective vision. The specific purpose of the comprehensive community plan was to serve as a tangible guide for neighborhood groups and organizations to easily identify priorities of actions and explore the potential for collective and well-integrated strategies to carry them out. These sorts of plans are not uncommon in Latino and minority neighborhoods around the nation.

The three *conversatorios*:

On March 11 and March 12, 2015, three *conversatorios* were held, organized under the title of "Roadmap for a Comprehensive Plan in the Latino Community of South Omaha." The Heartland Workers Center (HWC), the organization Justice for our Neighbors (JFON), and the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies of the University of Nebraska at Omaha (OLLAS) as well as an "expanded" roundtable of local leaders' were the initial conveners. The Sherwood Foundation supported the hiring of a facilitator, Carlos Espinoza-Toro, and also paid for operating expenses such as food and supplies.

For the March 11 *Conversatorio*, grassroots leaders, workers and residents of South Omaha were invited to the Heartland Workers Center. For the *conversatorios* that took place on March 12, participants were representatives and members of non-profit or corporate organizations who serve, or are interested in working with, the Omaha Latino community.

Distribution of participants in each *Conversatorio*

Conversatorio	Date	Number of Participants	Place	Type of Participants
1.	March 11th	23	HWC	community members (<i>grassroots</i>)
2.	March 12th – 11 am	22	Alumni Center UNO	Representatives of organizations who serve/work with the Omaha Latino community
3.	March 12th – 5 pm	24	Community Engagement Center – UNO	

Methodology

A similar methodology was used for all three *conversatorios*, although adjustments were made along the way, as we learned from the previous round. The methodology consisted of:

- Focus presentation
- Presentation of photos of South Omaha
- Presentation of Omaha map with selective zip codes and respective socio-economic data
- Break-out group exercises

The focus presentation was informed by the questions and ideas expressed in the invitation sent by e-mail to all participants. Its purpose was to guide the dialogue toward the goals stated in the introduction.

The photos served as a visual tool to begin exploring perceptions of South Omaha today and how we imagine South Omaha in the future.

The map and socio-demographic data were used to promote a dialogue about the social and economic conditions of the Latino community and the potential barriers to progress. OLLAS prepared five graphs with indicators about: 1) educational attainment (% of those who did not finish high school nor have a university degree); 2) percentage in poverty or at risk of poverty (% of poor children and of women head of household); 3) other indicators of socio-economic status (median family income and type of occupation). As a general rule, comparisons among different geographic areas or social groups help reveal, or demystify, certain aspects of reality which are not readily visible without them. Therefore, we decided to compare socio-economic characteristics of Latinos living in different parts of the city: 1) South (zip codes 68105, 68107, 68108); 2) South-West or South-Center (zip codes 68117 and 68127), and 3) West or North-West (68116 and 68164). The selection was based on our previous knowledge of these areas' general characteristics. Specifically, we know that income, levels of education, and the social status of occupations tend to be higher among those living in the North-West, lower in the South-West and South-Center, and lower still in the South. The data was from The American

Community Survey 2009-2013. OLLAS will be releasing a fact sheet in June, 2015 which illustrates some of the trends discussed during the *conversatorios*.

By themselves, these comparisons say little. Their relevance is mainly found in what they do not tell us, especially in the new questions they raise and are worth exploring. For example, to what do we owe the socio-economic differences found among Latinos who live outside and inside South Omaha? Are they simply the result of social mobility or of differences in human and cultural capital found among different types of immigrants (laborers, middle or upper middle class professionals) who in turn opt to locate in different geographic zones? Or is it that both factors play a role? We know that groups' socio-economic characteristics correlate in complex but statistically significant ways with other factors (racial and political identities, attitudes toward the government and social welfare systems and so forth). What impact might all this have, positive or negative, on the fact that an important segment of the emerging Latino and organizational leadership in South Omaha hail from other social groups and areas of the city?

The break-out group exercises and plenaries were meant to help groups of three or four people, as well as the collectivity, to further explore the questions suggested or not suggested by the materials distributed before and during the *conversatorios*.

Main Themes

In what follows, we offer a summary of the main themes and concerns that surfaced during the three *conversatorios*. We illustrate these themes with selective quotes from participants. The quotes were taken literally from transcribed recordings of the *conversatorios*.

I. What do we think about South Omaha?

Two complementary visions emerged regarding the conditions and experiences of the South Omaha community.

1. South O is a place with which we identify with: “we get to feel a little bit of our countries here,” and where there are many positive things to highlight. Those include a hard-working and enterprising community; the presence of large and small Latino businesses; closeness to workplaces; not much traffic and the fact that there are pedestrian-friendly areas; easy access to schools, community organizations, restaurants and banks. The March 11 group was of the opinion that “although South Omaha is not extremely safe... we feel safe because it is our community.” People feel that South O is improving, rather than getting worse: “I see the schools, the services we receive in South O and I feel that each time they are better.”

2. There are a variety of problems and deficiencies in South O. Among those noted were the poor condition of the streets (this damages vehicles and mars the aesthetics of the city); the city's deplorable trash collection service; poor conditions and maintenance of rental houses; the need to create more communal, walking and green spaces; lack of knowledge about where to go or who to call to complain about these problems.

II. How do we interpret the data on poverty, education, mobility?

There were conflicting and, at times, antagonistic reactions to the data and our decision to frame the conversation around geographic comparisons of Latinos' socio-economic differences across the city. This took the organizers by surprise. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, and judging by the evaluations and informal communications, it is clear that the majority of participants were interested in achieving a greater understanding of the data and the overall issue of inequity and poverty within the Latino community. It is worth noting that, although the census data is not exempt from problems, and is not sufficient by itself, the census is one of the most trustworthy sources that we have to detect general patterns and tendencies in the socio-economic and demographic realities of the Latino population. The methods for gathering and presentation of data have improved considerably during the last 10 to 15 years, especially since the initial publication of the American Community Survey. Nevertheless, a number of valid questions arose during the *conversatorios* and they are worth investigating further. OLLAS will sponsor a second census workshop on August 18. Save the date.

Five (5) main themes illustrate participants' unease with the data:

1. People are not always honest when reporting their income – in particular, the number of women who say they are heads of household. In addition, data is not always reported in a manner that can be trusted.

Here my partner was telling me that what surprised her most was about the number of women who are raising their families alone; but I disagree with her, because during the years that I have lived [here] I have seen that these statistics come from the Census, but there is much fraud in that women mark as if they were alone, and that's why it comes out like that, but let's say that 20% or 30% is not true.

And we also focused on the number of homes that are supported by a woman, possibly... and there is where we think there is a lack of validity in the data, not that I think that the data is not right, rather the way in which they are collected, because of fear, especially because of migratory status, the data are not truthful, that is, 35% of the homes are not supported by women alone.

We know that all the daily papers in the country are linked to a political party in some way or not? Then that data cannot be accepted simply as what they are (the truth). The Omaha World Herald has its point of view and logically they want to cause some reaction in the community for us, for [their own] benefit; really we have to look at what goes on beyond the data.

2. Many Latinos work in the informal economy. They are not using banks and they deal in cash. All contribute to over-estimations of their income. Here we should note that the opposite is also possible. In fact, the dominant tendency is for the census and other government measures to under-estimate the income of these groups

The Latino deals a lot in cash, for example when they pay for a loan they do not do it with a check; one tries to teach them, look, it is important for the sake of security that you do not pay \$700 dollars in cash, but the fact that they receive their payments in cash in their businesses, or some work in construction and they get paid in cash, so that is why they deal in cash, and some do not trust banks much.

3. The remittances they send to their countries suggest that their incomes are not as low as they appear. Here it would be worth noting that technically, remittances are expenses, and do not

necessarily affect data on incomes published by the ACS of the Census. This type of family obligation across borders is unavoidable in many cases, and may even contribute to poverty.¹

Another important and fundamental part of this statistical data is that sometimes our community, especially the first immigrant community, referring to the one that arrives first, is divided with one foot in their country of origin and the other in the United States, and sometimes their income is divided, and therefore does not show all that economic value that makes them transnational.

The topic of remittances, that is, much of our money, we earn more money, but it is not reflected in our bank account.

4. The numbers chosen for the presentation are not fully representative of the entire Latino population.

For me I would say that the numbers are not representative, that is what we were discussing, they don't represent the totality of what we want to see, we talk about a 70%, maybe about 56% living in Omaha South, of a 15% living in the middle and a 5% living in the west, for me, as I was saying, statistically that 5% in a survey is going to vary more or less a percent, that is, that 5% is forgotten, I don't know why we are focusing on that and we don't focus on the other rest of the population, we might say the 20 o 30% That is not being considered here, that is not part of the mobility except to the north here in this sector.

We should point out that it is unlikely that additional data would have altered the upward tendency of poverty among Latinos, or the geographic distribution of Latinos according to income levels. The social structure and segregation patterns of the city have not changed for generations. Those who reside in South and North Omaha are more likely to be economically and socially disadvantaged than those who reside in the North-West. This does not mean that everyone in South O is economically disadvantaged or that they will always be so. It is a population in constant movement and difficult to capture through static methodologies or data gathered at a single point in time.

5. The “quantitative” data is not trustworthy or sufficient to understand a reality that is better understood with “qualitative” information.

I was giving an example of someone who works with me... and earns \$20,000 dollars a year; she is not married but lives with someone who is not her husband and who doesn't have papers, obviously, legally she is the head of household, she manages the house, but the money is coming from somewhere else, if I tell this person “I'll raise your salary \$1 dollar,” she tells me, “no, please don't do it because I go

¹ The data on incomes presented at the *conversatorios* was taken directly from the results of the American Community Survey (ACS) collected for the Office of the Census of the United States gathered in the 2013 survey. Specifically, the data are percentages calculated with the individual responses to the question about what are the incomes received during the last twelve months (a year from the date the survey was completed). Included in the calculations are the salaries, commissions, tips, income from self-employment; interests, dividends, net income from rentals, income from author rights, or income from inheritance or trusteeship; income from social security or retirement for railroad personnel; supplemental security income (SSI); any payment of public assistance or welfare from the state or local office for social welfare; any other type of income, such as payments by the Veterans Administration (VA), unemployment compensation, pension for minor children, food pension or pension from their ex-spouse. Each person that fills out the survey reports the estimate of their incomes and it is that information that is grouped together and presented to the public. The census responses, by law, cannot be shared with any other government agency, and this reduces the need people may have to lie in the survey.

beyond... then I will not have Medicare for my children,” then I think that here is where we go to what my partner was going to say, I think it is better to base ourselves on the qualitative data.

Some issued warnings, not to scorn the quantitative data, and differed from the type of judgment expressed in the quote above:

Well, as a part of this group I believe that we do not have to base our opinions on qualitative analysis ignoring the quantitative, rather we need to incorporate it; we cannot throw out the data in the trash.

Just to not forget that in the example of the woman employee who did not want to receive the salary raise, it was because her partner did not have legal status... in other words, she is trying to protect... let us not stay with the idea of conformity, and that I am simply sitting here so they can give me, I am trying to do what I can so the whole family can “more or less be well”. If my partner had the possibility of working in a bank, or have his documents, then the story would be different, right?

And for sure, you need to weigh things, and not just accept that the poor are poor because it is convenient for them, because someone comes to give them something.

But we need to think that we have a mathematical problem, a structural problem, which has to do with distribution, not just of wealth, because we cannot forget that the meatpacking workers are happy to earn what they earn, but the meatpacking plants are filling up with billions of dollars which could be shared with the workforce, we cannot forget the distribution of education, education is not the same at Creighton Prep than it is given at OPS, we cannot forget the distribution of the political question, Districts 5, 6 and 7 are the ones to decide what happens politically in the Omaha metropolitan area, we cannot decide anything ourselves yet, that is, I know that it is true that we have parks, that we have a better quality of life if we compare it to the towns where we come from, but we cannot under any circumstance forget, the surplus of the product has to be distributed equally, that is, we cannot ourselves fall under that category, because then we are going to raise another generation like ours, and those of us who are over here let us speak the truth, we are doing well, we are better than many others, we earn better than many others, we live better than many others and if a minimum of those many others had this quality of life then I would go to heaven happy.

Three main themes illustrate efforts of participants to understand and explain, not necessarily doubt the data:

1. The majority of Latinos in South Omaha are laborers who receive low wages, have not lived in the city a long time, and want to be near their jobs in the meatpacking plants (South Omaha viewed as an *immigrant gateway*). What’s more, there is more research and there is more data available about the working class Latinos than there is about other socio-economic levels.
2. South Omaha Latinos who have accumulated some resources and can move their children to less congested neighborhoods and schools where there is less academic disparity among the students, do so. This results in a larger concentration of persons with lower socio-economic levels in South Omaha.
3. Living in the South is not necessarily equal to being poor or to being unable to experience social mobility. That is often a perception of those on the outside. The South is a place for families of diverse social and cultural backgrounds, appreciated by many who choose to reside there for generations. Within the South there is also income diversity. Paradoxically, the increase in housing prices is forcing some to relocate.

And you know, I think that South Omaha is going to be here, it will be here forever because look at how many years it has been here, and there are some people that will move to another place, but for the majority, those that are in South Omaha prefer to stay here and not all are poor, and they live here, but other people think that are poor because they live here.

III. What do we mean by poverty?

Some questioned the definition of poverty and wondered how what we call poverty in the U.S. differs from what we call poverty in Latin America. Questions also arose about how we perceive poverty among Latinos as opposed to the way it manifests itself among other minorities in the United States.

Truthfully for me the topic of defining poverty is very... raises a lot of suspicions and even I question their good intentions... there is lack of confidence in the term when referring to the Hispanic community... I felt and I feel it still that probably the African American community is poorer than ours, I am speaking of Nebraska or in Omaha.

Three main themes highlighted the differences between what we understand by poverty in this country and in our countries of origin:

1. Poverty in this country is rather optional. This theme manifested itself through two types of sub-themes:

1.1. At least for the Latinos, there are many job opportunities, even if many jobs do not pay all that well, or incomes are insufficient to accumulate wealth or other assets.

And that is what we were talking about the other time, here there is no poverty, we are poor because we want to, because there is work, call it legal, illegal, low wages...

It really struck me, because yes, in the United States from my own very personal perspective, poverty is optional, as opposed to other countries, here in the US it is optional, nevertheless as you yourself were mentioning, there are many unwritten rules as far as the management of resources in this country, due to the special situation of people in their immigration status, due also to the needs in their country of origin, as far as the vision they have about what is wealth, in this case how to make here what we call assets.

Some rejected the notion that being poor in this country is optional, and underscored instead the lack of sufficient access to information or education, especially among first-generation parents.

In a way I am going to disagree with you a bit about the fact that people are poor because they want to. I think you don't know what you don't know, we give classes in our organization about how to be good parents, we could judge the parents many times for what they are doing or not doing with their children, but in the end they are doing the best they can with what they know, yes there are different people who do wrong things or illegal things, whatever you want, but I agree that when one doesn't know, they do not have the ability to know how to do things in a different way, because they don't know how.

1.2. People are poor not simply because of a lack of education but because of a "conformist" culture" whereby achievements are measured against what we left behind and not by what is possible in this country. Some call for better leadership to break with the old culture.

I think we are talking about a generation where the parents are here, and just as with conformity, they think this is the most they can reach or aspire, they are doing the best possible job for their children and

they are, as we say, tied to one place where they cannot improve because of their migratory status or other things.

We were focused on an important topic, which is that of leadership and the capacity for greater vision, and not just the organizational leadership in South O, but also the will to be able to aspire to something better, and that is seen in those who just resign themselves merely to work and do not want to do anything else, or they are satisfied just by the fact that they have a job, this can be professionals as well as immigrant folks that work, and also the fact that there is a certain apathy toward taking advantage of the resources that already exist in our community to improve and move forward.

I said, in my personal opinion, that poverty in United States is optional... because as my companions already noted, there are people who have the immigration possibilities because of their legal status to be able to reach greater benefits from working better paying jobs but do not want to do it, since at home there did not exist a culture of teaching them that getting a Masters would be important, that getting a PhD is important, that to make an investment of your assets was important, so therefore we see... or I see... a very strong tendency to not find that desire, or as we mentioned a while ago, that interest in trying, not to just say I arrived at where I am now in Omaha the way I am, rather to want more, and we have a lack of leadership to point to this, to empower it, that is what we need.

Looking at the statistics, the level of poverty does surprise me, because I see that it is not the economic level [about which we need to talk], but rather about the social and cultural [level].

They do not aspire to more because more is unreachable, so they say o.k. with what I earn it is sufficient only to live in a house piled up with four or five other families, the rent is therefore very cheap because we are sharing it, so the only luxury I can give myself, maybe it is to buy myself a good truck, and put it out there in front of the house.

2. In the popular imagination of Latin Americans, poverty is generally associated with conditions that come closest to what international research organizations call “absolute” or “chronic poverty.” In this case, we are generally talking about people who must survive with less than \$2 a day and who have little chance of upward mobility across generations. For many Latin American immigrants, such conditions are non-existent in the United States, let alone in Omaha. Hence, it is hard to accept the validity of the census data. Within these same viewpoints, the large majority of Latin Americans with low incomes prefer to define themselves as members of the middle class, not as poor. To analyze this theme in greater depth, it would be necessary to explore the extent to which the Latino community in Omaha is undergoing a process of “social differentiation” whereby some have experienced upward mobility and earn incomes above the median according to the census. These persons tend to occupy positions of leadership in their professions and, increasingly, in the Latino community. On the other hand, there is a much larger number whose income places them at or near the poverty line. The implications for either tendency are profound for the community as well as for program directors and policy-makers.

Because with much of this money or salary that they receive they live very well here. For example, the majority that come from Guerrero, come from a house that doesn't even have a floor. Here they have a carpet, dirty but it is a carpet; and they send part of their money to Mexico... Then I think that it is more cultural and social, and that they feel they do not belong either here or there, and because of the low level of culture and of studies that the majority of people have; that is what they are leaving their children as inheritance.

Then based on this, those of us who are here need to try to understand what is poverty from the state or (inter)national point of view; one thing is what I might think that poverty is in Peru, and another thing is what poverty is here. We have to understand it here before we invite outside persons. For example, I

invited two persons (to the *conversatorio*). The first answer was “Poverty? You are crazy! What is the use of me sitting down and talking about poverty, if I go to South O and I see them driving huge trucks.” In other words, that may have been a critical or separatist commentary, nothing constructive at all, not open, but that is the way it is, I could not answer anything, ‘you know what, brother, in reality you cannot see poverty because you are not working there.’ I had no tools to explain it.

3. Mobility does not require one to leave South Omaha.

There is something else: Who are the poor? The father and mother that are working, they own a home they bought, it is not big, their children are in school and are doing well, and they are going to be poor because they pay for all the things that they did not have, and they want to give to their children, and they also pay for the university, the school, and it is possible that they still owe at least \$35,000 dollars for the house, but is this being poor? I don’t know, they have food, they have clothes, and they have all they need.

And you know, I think, South Omaha is going to be here, forever it is going to be here, because how many years it has already been, and there are some people that will be moving to another place, but for the majority, those that are here in South Omaha they prefer to stay here, and not all are poor, they live here, and other people think they are poor because they live here.

IV. Where should efforts be spent?

1. Need to change in the “mentality” of Latinos. Terms such as “culture” and “mentality,” when used as a catch-all explanation for a wide variety of social phenomena, may lead us into dangerous quicksand. These terms are too general and ambiguous to be useful unless they are carefully defined every time they are used. A more open discussion about how we use these terms, and what purpose they serve and for whom, may be something to consider in the future.

There was a more concrete conversation about the change of “mentality” with reference to civic behavior, or lack of it. Specifically, some expressed concern about “letting children behave poorly when we go shopping,” or “throwing trash out on the street.” In general, this call for change in the mentality of Latinos had more to do with the perception that there is a “lack of belonging” in the place where we live. This is allegedly demonstrated by the absence of respect for public places, lack of participation in local committees designed to find solutions to our city’s problems, and by low voter turnouts. There was talk of encouraging more collaboration among neighbors and parents, and of reducing the consumerist competition among people which breeds individualism and lack for collective concerns. Finally, the need for this change of mentality was also linked to the earlier discussion about those who abuse the system, particularly safety-net and other public benefits and services.

2. Structural, not just individual, changes are needed. A minority underscored the need for changes that went beyond the individual level or within the Latino cultural practices themselves:

Although there are individual changes, real solutions are not going to happen simply because one or another individual may achieve something; they can serve as models, they can inspire others, but to generate a true social change we need to understand the barriers because this requires collective changes, systemic change.

The need was also set forth to continue educational processes to encourage new business ventures that would go beyond processes for personal growth and individual empowerment. The

goal would be to create bridges with mediating institutions (unions, churches, non-profit organizations) to bring to the community new alternatives for change (for example: reinvent the south, buy meatpacking plants not simply work in them, build new transportation routes, water-theme parks, collective living alternatives instead of moving to the west).

Additionally, participants in the first *Conversatorio* (again, consistent style) briefly talked about the need for changes in the city's infrastructure, asking that roads be fixed, more benches be installed, improve the parks, more trash bins be placed on the streets, and that special bicycle lanes be created.

If I had a lot of money someday, what I would like to change in my *neighborhood* would be the park that is behind my house, I would like to fix it with more games, more beauty, to make it attractive with lots of color so that children would really want to go, it would have a water park just like other places, or a doggy park, I see lots of dogs around, so that children could bring their dogs as well. That would be one thing, and the other if I had more money, I would put all that in all the neighborhoods, because I sometimes feel that children do not come out to play because on the street the cars run by very fast, but if they all this, then the little children would go out to play without any problems, but our community has to care for them, not destroy them.

I was reading a book about where they were organizing houses of prayer... but what I want to propose is not houses of prayer, but houses in each corner of the neighborhood, that would be dedicated to greeting all my new neighbors, to say to them "Hello, welcome, this is such and such a zone, this is my name, these resources are available here, if you have any question," that is, that there would be more of this, because among us we get to know each other but not necessarily our needs or problems.

3. More and better programs, methodologies and strategies to learn English. Not surprisingly Latinos once again identified the lack of English language fluency as one of the biggest obstacles affecting social and generational mobility. All agreed that more efforts are needed in this area given the importance of fluid bilingualism in the labor market and in parents' participation in their children's education. Some participants considered language as a barrier that can be overcome with efforts coming from Latinos themselves: "All of us can learn English."

I think that much of the poverty is due to the fact that our Latino race, we Latinos from the places we come from, come with very limited education, with little training, and many barriers that make it hard for us to move forward; the main one is the language, the poverty of our children is because we cannot have a good job because of the language, which is not a barrier because we can overcome it, but it is a difficulty we find when we first arrive here.

And often also because of the language, in schools the parents do not have access to know what their children are studying, the level they are in, to get involved with them, and so the children are also growing up with the same inheritance, you might say, that their parents are living.

4. More educational and training opportunities for adults and youth. The data presented revealed that Latinos' educational level is consistently lower than that of other groups. These numbers provoked an assortment of reactions, which ranged from attributing this pattern to the lower expectations found among first-generation parents (the issue of "conformity"), to issuing proposals and a call to improve the offerings and methods for training said parents. Among the initiatives that were suggested was that of looking at the young people as a resource and allowing them to be exposed and share stories of success among their and their parents'

generation as a way of raising expectations. Others spoke of the need to invert the infamous tactic of “the crab,” which pushes others down so he can come out ahead. Instead, this fable should be re-written as the crab that got out and then lent a hand to those waiting to get out as well.

My point is that education has much to do with that, and also the situations our countries face, for example, my mother used to tell me that I only needed to graduate from High School and that she did not want me to go to college, because she only went up to the sixth grade, and High School was more than sufficient, then we were also talking about that parents do not understand the importance of education and do not instill that importance in their children, mainly the first generation, then we were discussing the importance of programs that demonstrate to the parents the importance of education.

A point I want to stress and I mentioned in the earlier meeting... is how we can target young people... I think that right now we are focusing too much on the statistics we saw, the parents who are poor, single mothers, but if we go to the center, people my age, for example, I have conversations with my parents daily, I live with them, and there are things I tell them that I think my father when he hears them first says no, because I am the father, I am the ‘macho’ and my daughter is not going to tell me what I have to do, but I tell him something, and then he reflects on it and says “Wow!” My daughter is telling me this, ok, this means so much more for him, right, and at the same time I have thousands of nephews and nieces and I teach them, you know, this is the mayor of Omaha, and my little 7 year-old niece, she’s like ¡oh, that’s so cool.

Some emphasized the need for financial empowerment among women and men (savings and investment, remittances, future planning for children and for old age), and to teach Latinos how to invest their income and increase their assets.

And one of the things that he always tells me (his life coach) is that, in terms of my career it doesn’t apply, but he always tells me, “I want you to be financially successful” because if you are successful in your finances, that will be reflected in all other aspects of your life... that is something that I had never thought about or had taken into account.

What I consider very important is the strength of the organizations that are actually present with the Latino community, if they are working together, if there is a working plan developed, for example to bring programs about financial management, that is, people are not being taught how to manage their finances, and this opens the door for those who do have that knowledge.

5. The need for more and better mentorship programs. The need for more mentorship emerged repeatedly and in different forms during all three *conversatorios*, mainly in the voices of parents but also of the youth and other participants.

I think that what is most needed, especially in the Latino culture, is to have persons that are mentors not only for the youth but also for parents, to guide them in various areas, not only finances, not only education, but in areas where they can be taught, or can tell them “look, you are doing this well for your child, and how good it is that you are involved in taking them to school activities, but you can do even a bit more, and contact their teachers,” things like that.

Well, we agreed on a very important one, that schools where are children attend, would have seminars on psychology so that parents can understand better what motivates our children to get into drugs, or to act with violence, or also to have great dreams and be great professionals, so we can know more about our children.

6. Better salaries and legal status. Per usual, low salaries and the absence of legal statuses were identified as important barriers to social mobility and equality. However, there were no concrete suggestions as to the kinds of collective visions or strategies to address such barriers. It was

perhaps self-evident that many community organizations deal with these barriers on a daily basis.

We came to live in places that are not ours, to pay rent, pay bills, pay for everything, because here our children go to public schools, and don't require uniforms, they don't ask for anything, it is a bit difficult to go forward with the salaries we get... we work in a restaurant, jobs that we could say are... not of poor quality because they are of greatest quality, but the salaries are very, very low for the number of children that we often have at home.

And it is often because they cannot work legally, they do not have papers to work legally, so they can work for a while but sometimes they leave, so the mothers do not have what they need for five children many families are like that, and to be able to support this, rent, food, everything, and do not get benefits, the only benefit they receive is Medicaid if they are born here, but other than that, they cannot apply for anything else.

The same corporations that have employed them have taken advantage of their migration situation, because it is well known that the majority of people who work in the plants have been able to get somewhere some "little papers" so they can work, then the corporations look the other way and they say ok, I look the other way and I pay you very little, you want me to pay you the just wage then you have to have what is necessary, then this is an evil that has kept growing for a long time.

Final considerations and next steps

This is the first time that we attempted a process of conversations of this sort. Many have expressed a desire for continuing the dialogue and all said it was an important process. The process barely got started however, and the objectives set forth in the introduction are far from fulfilled. The discussion took an unexpected turn when concerns with the validity of the census figures on Latino poverty and inequality seemed to capture the attention of participants, leaving little time for a more in-depth discussion of these issues and the corrective actions themselves. In hindsight, however, it was a productive dialogue and it did get us closer to fulfilling the first objective of creating a critical consciousness of these issues.

After much thought, the Sherwood Foundation and organizers came to the conclusion that it is best not to schedule additional *conversatorios* at this time, but to pause while a number of organizations conclude data collection and strategic planning processes. The latter should yield some important information which can further enrich these dialogues. Many also expressed concerns with lack of time. In the meantime, OLLAS will continue to publish reports and organize collaborative initiatives which we hope contribute to these conversations, and are consonant with our mission to create spaces for learning outside the classroom. Don't forget to save August 18 for our second census workshop. We offer three final reflections:

1. The topic of poverty and reproduction of inequalities inevitably generates controversy, both in the academic world and in society as a whole. However, it is an unavoidable conversation, given the persistent presence of these patterns and their negative impact in our communities. Our obligation is to understand these topics ever better, and confront their impact with the best possible tools. Suggestions about the type of themes we should explore and the best spaces to learn about them would be fruitful.

2. The problem with the data. As we mentioned at the start, the census data is not perfect, but it is the only source we have that tell us which direction the community and its various population

segments are headed. The voices on the ground are very important to complement those, and any other type of large data bases. Nevertheless, we need to take into account that we each see reality from the perspective of the small piece of ground where we stand, from our own histories, our socio-economic status, and our ideological and political biases. That is why anecdotes, oral histories, individual opinions (qualitative data) have to be treated with as much care as we treat the quantitative data of surveys such as the Census.

3. The most contentious point of the debate about poverty and social mobility is most often found when the discussion turns from merely describing patterns of inequality to exploring the reasons why some people are poor and others are not--or why some are able to climb the social mobility ladder and others get stuck at the bottom rungs of that ladder. The sharpest line is drawn between those who believe that individual characteristics and levels of "individual responsibility" account for most of these differences and those who put the onus on larger, systemic and institutional, forces over which economically- and politically- disadvantaged populations have little control. Sharply different views about the poor and inequality become dominant at different historical junctures. Today, powerful elites promote the view that markets and the "job creators" in the private sector, not governments, are the most efficient vehicles for creating opportunities leading to a better distribution of goods and services. They champion the "individual responsibility," ideology which today infuses popular visions. Poverty and inequality, according to this neoliberal ideological perspective, are largely a function of individual differences and their talents, skills and levels of effort. Both views have vastly different consequences for how we go about doing our work in the Latino community or relating to its population. This may also be a topic for more in-depth discussions later.

We all know that reality is much more complex than all this and it is important to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of how these different factors, located at the institutional and individual levels, combine to increase or diminish equity and social mobility in our communities. These dialogues can be uncomfortable and even threatening to some at times. But they are necessary. The community is ready for it.