



# Building a Healthier and Sustainable Boricua Community



 **Que Ondee Sola**  
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# Thinking Green:

## Building a Healthier and Sustainable Boricua Community

Did you know that the Humboldt Park Puerto Rican community has the highest rates when it comes to obesity and diabetes? Statistics prove that the Humboldt Park Puerto Rican community suffers from childhood/adult obesity and diabetes more than any other community. Furthermore, Humboldt Park has the highest rates of childhood overweight obesity in comparison to Illinois, the United States, Chicago, and West Town, with 21% being overweight and 48% being obese.

In 2008 when I was a student of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS), a HS that exist within the Puerto Rican community, already had developed a community initiative-to-combat the problem of childhood/adult obesity and diabetes. With that, the idea of constructing a greenhouse was already on its way.

Many will agree that the Humboldt Park Puerto Rican community lacks access to fresh and affordable produce. I remember attending a presentation by PACHS principal Mathew Rodriguez. He quickly caught my attention, as he began the presentation by mentioning that the community is sadly considered a "food desert", an area in which residents have little to no access to fresh affordable fruits and vegetables. As a solution, community leaders and residents alongside the staff and students of PACHS, have come together to further form a community of wellness by ensuring the accessibility of fresh

affordable produce, and to improve the community's ability and capacity to be self-sufficient in cultivating affordable, fresh, herbs, fruits and vegetables.

A wonderful part of this transformative initiative is that the students of PACHS are fully engaged in the process. In the overall vision, could we have ever imagined a eco-friendly greenhouse being built on the rooftop above a community high school, residents cultivating and producing fresh produce in their own backyards, or edible gardens existing within our own community? Furthermore, assuring food access is important in a number of ways. In one way, food production in the community that includes gardening and urban agriculture can help develop an indigenous commercial base, creating local wealth that can help people to become property owners or afford increasing rents and stay in the community.

This incredible example of how people begin to build a healthier, sustainable community speaks to our ability and the possibilities of making the impossible happen. However, by a community thinking green, it also speaks to a different form of how teachers teach and how students learn. It allows for us to rethink what is urban agriculture. It defines the meaning of ordinary people taking up leadership. It speaks to real change and how students become involve with improving their community in public health.

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Que Ondee Sola was established in 1972 and remains the oldest Puerto Rican & Latina/o university student publication in the U.S. Our mission is to provide the NEIU community with a relevant and engaging publication that deals with student issues with a focus on Puerto Ricans and Latinas/os, our communities, and our *patrias*.

Que Ondee Sola continues to affirm the right of Puerto Rican self-determination, freedom for all Puerto Rican political prisoners, and support for a truly participatory democracy.

## Que Ondee Sola

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# The Greening of a Food Desert:

## *Building the Humboldt Park Community Through Food Production*



proposed project is designed to address a highly significant health, social and economic issue in our community – the community's designation as a food desert. Community residents will be actively engaged in the planning and development of the necessary systems of production, distribution and consumption of nutritious, culturally defined and community-specific produce in transforming the desert into a fertile oasis. By addressing the need for nutritious, fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables and recognizing the excessively high prevalence of diabetes, obesity, hypertension and coronary disease within the community, the program seeks to inform, engage, and transform the community environment. The Initiative is based on the belief that local food necessities go beyond simply growing and distributing food.

### **Summary of Initiative**

Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) have developed a comprehensive, multi-faceted, community wide initiative in urban agriculture. The vision of the Greater Humboldt Park Urban Agriculture Initiative is to develop community self-sufficiency in the production of key aspects of the community's nutritional reserve. The

Effective solutions to local food security issues, improved health outcomes and overall community wellness must be sustainable and involve all members of a community, especially the youth. As the lead organization PACHS spearheaded the Humboldt Park Urban Agriculture Initiative as an outgrowth of its integrated, student-directed, project-based science and math curriculum based on Urban Agriculture. The initiative affirms that



our youth are key agents in the process of long-term, sustainable change within the community. Through community inquiry and participatory research, vital elements of the initiative were conceived of and elaborated by the students themselves. The initiative is designed to further engage youth (from toddlers to teens) in addressing local food needs to ensure that they develop the skills that are necessary and are prepared as adults to take on key roles as leaders of their community. It is also designed to engage the adults in the community (including the elderly), many of whom are experienced farmers from Puerto Rico, Mexico and southern United States, or are one generation removed from their agricultural past. The Initiative will team enterprising students and other nascent urban farmers with the many community

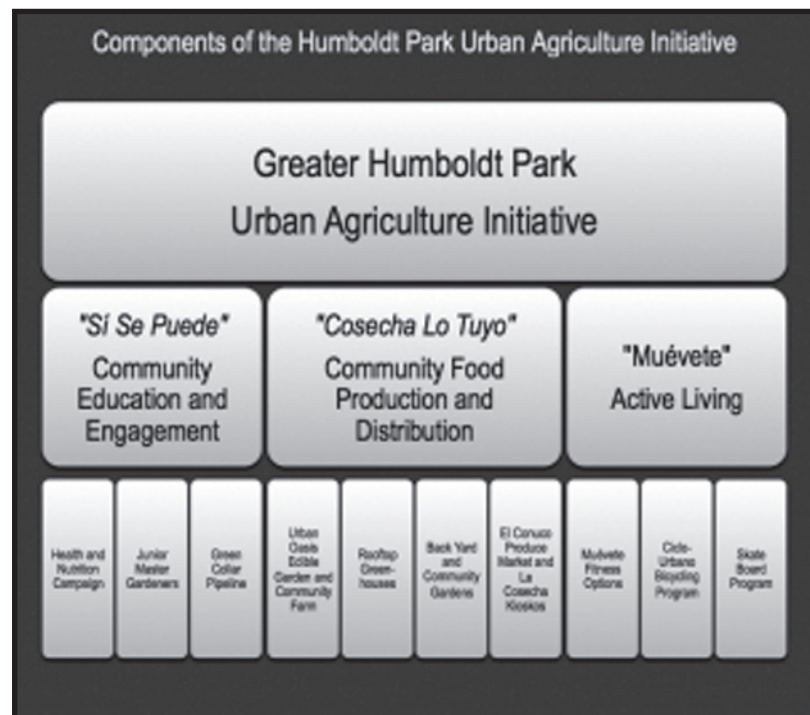
residents that have a proud agricultural heritage, to resolve the community's nutritional and economic needs—truly a multi-generational approach.

The Initiative is comprised of nine major components designed to engage the community in the building of a healthy sustainable community that is self-sufficient in addressing its nutritional and health concerns. The components (graphically represented below) are not a step-by-step approach to community building, but rather an ongoing, fluid approach to identifying, evaluating, and addressing the community's critical needs. The components are described in detail in pages 21 through 27 below.

The Initiative encompasses the germination, cultivation, production, marketing and distribution of locally grown, nutritious food that is free of herbicides, pesticides and other chemical contaminants. The enhanced food production will be complemented by community education and engagement in nutrition, exercise and overall wellness.

## Designation as a Food Desert

In 2006, LaSalle Bank commissioned a report,



“Good Food: Examining the Impact of Food Deserts on Public Health in Chicago,” in which Greater Humboldt Park was identified as being within the boundaries of one of Chicago’s three food deserts. A food desert is a large geographic area in which residents have little to no access to fresh affordable fruits and vegetables. These deserts are also characterized by grocery stores that only sell processed food and by an overabundance of fast food restaurants. Community residents are afflicted by inordinately high prevalence of obesity, diabetes, hypertension and coronary disease. According to “The Community Survey in Humboldt Park: Preventing Obesity and Improving Our Health,” authored by PRCC and other community allies in 2006, 35% of the community’s adults are obese, a rate that is 40% greater than that of adults in the rest of Chicago. Twenty five percent (25%) of adults in Humboldt Park who were either overweight or obese thought that they were at the right weight or even underweight. The Community Survey also found that 50% of the children in the community are obese, and an additional 14% are overweight. The data reinforced the results of a 2002-2003 US Census population survey that found that 46% of the children in the community were obese and close to 90% of the caretakers of these children did not recognize that their children were at an unhealthy

weight.

## **Community Vibrancy and Resilience**

The paucity of nutritious food in the community, and the resultant sequelae of illnesses are decimating a community that is otherwise vibrant and resilient. Community residents are becoming well organized and are working assiduously to stave off the encroachment of gentrification and the resultant displacement of families. The degree of civic engagement and collaboration with elected officials is high. The level of community building and community development is exemplary.

In 1993, the local alderman convened a community summit, attended by well over 1,000 residents, to identify community needs and determine priorities. One of the outcomes was the development of the Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP), which is comprised of over 100 community organizations (including PACHS and PRCC), schools, block associations and religious institutions.

The community collaborative was charged with crafting a comprehensive, inclusive community development plan designed to preserve the community and guard against gentrification and displacement. Over 600 community

residents participated in the planning process. A key goal was to empower the community to determine the type of development that is to take place. Key Leaders met with the City's Planning Commission and secured control of 154 city-owned vacant lots in the area. This victory significantly impacted the morale and engagement of the residents in the betterment of the community. Twenty (20) of those lots have already been developed into 152 units of much needed, affordable housing for low-income residents, and an additional 150 units are presently under construction.

### **The Institute of Puerto Rican Art and Culture**

IPRAC is a state of the art exhibition space and an active studio for the teaching and production of art. It is located on a 3-acre parcel of parkland within Humboldt Park. It was once a stable for horses and sat abandoned for 3 decades. Now it is a magnificent community institution instead of the eyesore that it was. IPRAC has made available a half-acre of its land to PACHS and PRCC for use in the Urban Agriculture Initiative. It is understood that the resulting gardens will be esthetically pleasing so that it fits seamlessly within the nature of the Institute.

### **Recreating the Built Environment to Foster Community Food Production**

The vision includes the construction of greenhouses on the rooftops of buildings throughout the community. These will be critical components of an expansive endeavor to have the community grow its own nutritious produce. The proprietors of ten buildings within a city block of PACHS and PRCC have expressed a commitment to making their rooftops available for this purpose, provided a feasibility study is done that ensures the structural integrity of their edifice and that funding for the addition is secured.

Reconceptualizing the use of these rooftops in this manner provides multiple benefits for the proprietors and residents of the buildings, and for the community's common environment as well. Most of the sun's energy beaming on the roofs is detrimental to building and the community, as it increases the cost of cooling the building and contributes to urban heat.

Our vision is to efficiently harness this rooftop solar energy by converting it to photosynthesis in the greenhouses and photovoltaic energy in solar panels that will be installed alongside the greenhouses. The solar electricity produced will power the mechanicals of the greenhouses and may even be channeled to provide for all or part of the electrical demand of the building itself; all of this in addition to the production of nutritious produce. We are



presently in discussions with

Youth Build, Inc. to engage and train our students in the design and construction of the greenhouses and in the installation of these rooftop solar panels.

### **Rooftop Greenhouses**

This element is another example of a component that is born of student innovation. It is also an example of the recreation of the built environment, constructing eco-friendly, solar-powered greenhouses on the roofs of buildings in the community.

The initial and prototypical greenhouse

has been constructed on the roof of PACHS's cafeteria, placing it immediately adjacent to the science laboratory, making it an extension of the school's lab. This greenhouse will be operational by April 2011. It is designed as a "smart" greenhouse in which the critical functions and operations, such as heating/cooling, ventilation, irrigation and nutrient supply, will be computer controlled. Students will set the parameters, but the system will be fully automated to ensure optimal crop quality, maintenance and harvest. This eco-friendly greenhouse will ultimately be solar-powered, irrigated by re-cycled rainwater, and will be free of pesticides, fertilizers and other chemical pollutants. The Sí Se Puede Campaign will serve to



identify unemployed or underemployed community residents, preferably the residents of the buildings where the greenhouses will be constructed, to train along with our students in soil and hydroponic cultivation and in establishing and maintaining the greenhouses. As with the Urban Oasis, the Initiative will seek to secure Ameri-corps funding for these community residents, providing them with living wage stipends, health insurance and educational stipends. The Ameri-corps volunteers will principally be responsible for the cultivation, harvesting and upkeep of greenhouses. Once the greenhouses are fully operational, the estimated yields will be 6,000 to 10,000 pounds of produce per greenhouse. The cultivation will be monitored closely to ensure maximum quality and efficiency. Faculty from UIUC's College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) will provide consultation, training and technical assistance on greenhouse and hydroponics maintenance and operation.

## Backyard and Community Gardens

The Sí Se Puede Campaign will encourage community residents to engage in backyard gardening. They will be encouraged to cultivate three to four times more than what their family will consume. The excess is to be shared with neighbors who do not have the means or ability to cultivate their own. Alternatively,

the excess can be donated or sold at the Community Produce Market.

The backyard gardeners will be supported by volunteer Master Gardeners and Junior Master Gardeners in collaboration with the Cook County Extension Office of UIUC. Support will include training in methods of raised bed and/or container gardening to ensure that the produce is free of soil contaminants.

*Taken from booklet **The Greening of a Food Desert: Building Community Through Food Production**. A collaboration between The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School with the generous support of The Chicago Community Trust*

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# Greening the Rooftops of Paseo Boricua

Que Ondee Sola



Two years ago to the day, on March 3, 2009, I recall standing in the science classroom at Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS), 2739 W. Division St, during a tour of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. I listened as teacher and Assistant Principal Carlos de Jesus outlined a plan for a rooftop greenhouse to be constructed on the building, offering students tangible applications of their studies in biology and botany.

A beautiful dream, I thought, but how

could this possibly happen in our lifetimes? Like Frank Lloyd Wright's fabled mile-high skyscraper, or the closer-to-home Bloomingdale Trail, ambitious projects often seem the stuff of dreams, perhaps never to see the light of day, or at least leaving the initial planners a bit grayer around the temples than they'd hoped by groundbreaking. And rooftop urban agriculture only happens downtown, doesn't it? Where the tourists and corporate headquarters, and therefore the capital, flow more freely?

But I stood in that same classroom yesterday, just two short years later, watching amidst a standing-room-only crowd as PACHS Principal Matthew Rodriguez cut the ribbon for that very greenhouse. And despite my own lack of religious leanings, the experience seemed nothing short of a miracle, nothing less than sacred.

Of course the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC), either alone or in partnership, has made miracles happen before. A walk down Division Street between the mighty steel flags is a reminder of their living legacy on Paseo Boricua. But that's only part of the story. There's the community-run bilingual newspaper, *La Voz del Paseo Boricua*, built

largely out of sweat equity and volunteer labor, showcasing the positive stories happening every day in Humboldt Park. There's Vida/SIDA, an HIV/AIDS resource center which has offered bilingual and bicultural health services—including free HIV testing and condoms—for over twenty years, and more recently has sponsored a transgender beauty pageant and a transgender business incubator.

There is the retail corridor of Paseo Boricua itself, fostering local ownership of indigenous businesses. There is the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, the La Casita community garden, the fought-for and restored Crucifixion de Pedro Albizu Campos mural on North Avenue, and the many annual parades and festivals. There is the popular Muévete exercise program, recently featured in the New York Times; the NIH-funded Block-by-Block diabetes intervention project; and the Ciclo Urbano bike shop, poised to launch a bicycle manufacturing program, which will create jobs by constructing mobile produce delivery systems on wheels.

And of course there is PACHS itself, a school for students that conventional education forgot, where young people are encouraged to find their way by studying their own history, exploring and celebrating their unique identities, becoming local leaders, and eventually entering college, careers, or other means

of contributing to the larger community.

One of those students delivered a piece of original writing as part of yesterday's greenhouse ribbon-cutting: an irreverent and on-point "Green Middle-Finger Manifesto" to all the naysayers; all those who would fill her local community with alcohol, fast food, and bags of potato chips rather than healthy produce; all those who doubted this vision was possible.

But possible it was. Tangible it was. Though the continued hammering was a reminder of the labor invested in this up-to-the-minute addition to the school, visitors were invited to walk through the greenhouse structure, feeling its sturdiness, witnessing the young tomato plants and pepper and cilantro seedlings—which will form the basis of sofrito, an iconic staple of Puerto Rican cuisine—and ultimately understanding this project as a fitting tribute to Puerto Rican author and activist Juan Antonio Corretjer, whose birthday is celebrated by PRCC annually on March 3.

The greenhouse project, while making significant contributions to the PACHS science curriculum, will cast an even wider net of impact. This structure, which received administrative and/or financial support from a diverse portfolio of sources—including 26th Ward Alderman Roberto Maldonado, 4th District State Representative Cynthia Soto, the Chicago Community Trust's Fresh Taste Initiative,

the Humboldt Park New Communities Program, and private contributions—is intended as just one of twenty rooftop greenhouses to eventually dot Paseo Boricua. This network will form the basis of a homegrown organic food system, providing affordable produce to Humboldt Park, which has been designated a food desert.

This is an integrated community vision

of health, wellness, education, and self-actualization writ large. I'll never bite into a tomato the same way again.

*The Puerto Rican Cultural Center welcomes donations of dollars and/or volunteer labor to advance this vision. They are also seeking investors for a new fresh-produce cooperative. Those interested may contact Raul Echevarria at [raule@prcc-chgo.org](mailto:raule@prcc-chgo.org) or Jose-Luis Rodriguez at 773-278-6737.*

## Green Middle Finger Manifesto

Food desert

Lacking fresh organic vegetables that can be accessible

to families in the community

Yet, a great variety of drive-thru's, fast food, pick-up-and-go windows

Lie in the alignment of our Humboldt Park streets

Dinners wrapped in aluminum, pre-heated, re-heated preservatives

Wrapped up, boxed up, hugged up in paper bags

That get tossed away like healthy habits

Green House

Nurturing growth, organic fresh vegetables

That can be accessible to the community



Seeds that are planted in the rough of our discordant  
world

The beauty that can grow from La Division's concrete

Like students achieving and breaking stereotypical  
molds

Seeds that grow fast like Humboldt Park youth

Green House, the first step to healthy habits as a  
whole

We are now giving a green middle finger to our food  
deserted home

Green middle finger to

Pre-heated, re-heated preservatives

That come wrapped-up, boxed up hugged up

In paper bags, that gets tossed away like healthy  
habits

Green middle finger manifesto

We are now changing Humboldt Park

Preventing health disparities like diabetes and obesity

Allowing us to live longer deep rooted in the parks soil

Like Puerto Rican green peppers in this green house  
sill

We are the beautiful seeds growing from La Division's  
concrete

Like sofrito ingredients that will cultivate,

with the Humboldt Park youth

Green middle finger manifesto

## Dr. Víctor Ortíz

*Que Onde Sola*

Since its genesis, the objective of *Que Onde Sola* has been to nurture the intersection between this university, Latina/o communities, and Latin America as a way to equip students with a holistic educational experience deeply relevant to the demographic realities of contemporary United States society. One way that this guiding principle has been carried out is through our continued guidance and support of the Latino & Latin American Studies program (LLAS). After all, it was over three decades ago that a group of our staff members and other students, community members, and faculty came together to develop the embryo of LLAS, with assistance from the Center for Inner City Studies. Today, *Que Onde Sola* is proud to announce that LLAS has been approved by the multiple channels of the university to be a full academic major after years of being just a minor. In midst of great feelings of triumph and jubilation, it must be acknowledged that such a long-awaited feat did not happen over night or without much struggle. This achievement is found in fact that the program maintains profound roots in the life and needs of students and the community, and if such a relationship continues it has the potential for brilliant inflorescence as a major. However, in academia and in bureaucracies, a reciprocal and sincere community and student engagement is not

the norm; many times there are particular figures that fight the daily battles to ensure that legacies and relationships stay intact. Thus, it would be horrendously spurious not to acknowledge the immensely valuable leadership of the program's coordinator for the last ten years, Dr. Víctor Ortíz.

In a statement full of integrity and candor, *Que Onde Sola* would betray the very essence of our existence and purpose at the university if we did not support wholeheartedly Dr. Ortíz and respect his accomplishments. There are very few program directors in any institution who give due regard to student input and participation and who actively seek out community organizations. Even in issues that do not directly affect his program, Dr. Ortíz has been there for students. When we pushed to secure a comprehensive Latina/o Cultural & Resource Center, there was no bigger supporter than in him. That cannot be forgotten.

With his keen vision of possibilities and empathy, students at NEIU are given the ability to understand that Latinas/os are a heterogenous people intricately connected to the long-standing social, political, cultural, and economic history of this country. Without Dr. Víctor Ortíz, LLAS may not have been a major or even

the comprehensive minor that it has been. And it is the belief of *Que Ondee Sola* and many students on campus that the stability of LLAS in these delicate and transitory times can only be guaranteed with Dr. Ortíz as its director.

In a series of articles that began in the February edition, *Que Ondee Sola* will continue to highlight multiple figures that embody the Latina/o presence and persistence at the university. For this month's edition, it is our honor to highlight Dr. Ortíz.

### **Tell me about yourself.**

I was born in El Paso, Texas, but raised in México in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. I got my Ph.D at Stanford University in Anthropology and worked at University of Illinois Chicago for seven years and came to Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) as a coordinator for the Latino & Latin American Studies (LLAS) program in 2001.

### **What has been your major accomplishments in the last 10 years as Coordinator of LLAS?**

The program is distinctively recognized as an academic foothold for Latino aspects in society and at the university. The program has now an established set of faculty members, allocated resources, institutional procedures, and a long chain of programatic events and other accomplishments. The academic soundness is very well established. We

have a comprehensive course coverage of the complexity of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the U.S., even though more support is needed for more complete coverage.

We have an advisory board, invested in the mission and programmatic functioning of the program. We have well established connections with community organizations that mutually enrich the educational and professional opportunities of our students. The program has also provided channels for faculty collegiality and active participation through cultural and social events, and some research opportunities.

The number of courses has steadily increased, along with the number of students minoring in the program with some minor fluctuations. One important manifestations of the soundness of the program is the fact that in spite of the elimination of a minor for a requirement for graduation the number of minors has remained generally steady. Along with everything, the program has been an important voice to remind the university of its important role as a Hispanic Serving Institution along with the importance of Latino and Latin American issues in this country as a whole. All of this has been done with a solid regard for the academic and all inclusive nature of the unit.

A centerpiece of these accomplishment is the imminent approval of the major for

the program. I must underscore the fact that this major is a result of collaborations among a number of faculty, students, and administrators along with members of the community at large. Equally significant is the fact that we have worked very hard to assure the professional and civic value our major would draw from it.

**What is the role of the Coordinator of the Latino & Latin American Studies program?**

My role is to provide a vision, generate consensus and involvement, to procure administrative resources, to promote the program, to make it attractive in people's minds, to oversee its day-to-day, and to set a direction for it.

I have set-up a very inclusive and participatory environment for the program, which there has been a very active advisory board currently made-up of fourteen members consisting of academic professionals and faculty members. The role of the advisory board is to help develop the program and to provide me input on its functioning and enrich its vision. Also, it acts as a sounding board and provide and assure the collective sanctioning of my decisions that I then take to the administrators for implementation.

**How does the program intersect with the other programs and departments at NEIU?**

The program has the mixed blessing of being an interdisciplinary unit. That means it does not have faculty of its own, but draws from different departments for both LLAS courses as well as cross-listed courses. This situation greatly enriches the diversity of offerings and the opportunity to collaborate with other units. This has been done with great success and harmony through the years. Yet, it also entails that as coordinator I have to interact with diverse chairs and accommodate the program's needs to their department's priorities. In this respect the support I have gotten from the administration has varied through time.

So, at first the program received formal commitment for five new hires with specified teaching commitments dedicated to the program. This arrangement has been vital to the growth and functioning of the program. Unfortunately, for the recent hires pertaining to LLAS we have not been as lucky in securing official commitments for teaching responsibilities dedicated to the program. The irregularity of this attitude from the administration is particularly serious as we proceed to launch the major for the program. The major requires certainty in the offerings we will be able to provide to students and for that we need solid and explicit commitment of faculty who will be teaching those courses.

Another particular feature in the intersection of the program with other



units has been its placement within the mega-department of sociology, women's studies, and african and african-american studies. The program has collaborated regularly with women's studies and african and african-american studies. However, some administrative complications has occurred due to undue interference from chairs of sociology who have attempted to intervene in issues pertaining to the program that are beyond their responsibility or understanding given their lack of knowledge of Latino and Latin American issues and disregard for the vision and nature of the program.

As I mention before, the relationship with administrators has been in general positive, especially at the onset of the program. Unfortunately, in recent years some disturbing tendencies to isolate or disallow the needs and potentials of the program have occurred. As I mentioned before, their reluctance to commit to new hires to any teaching responsibility to the program is a case in point.

However, the efficiency and consistency in handling the approval of the major has been irregular. It is obvious to me contrary to public statements addressing demands from students and community for the program, administrators have been slow and at times inattentive in the particulars of procedures, causing undue delays. There has also been instances of capricious and poorly advised interferences with my role as the steward of the proposal for a major

in recent months without regard for due process, accountability, or consequences for the program. I also feel that the program could greatly contribute to taking advantage of the university's designations as a Hispanic Serving Institution. The program can generate collective actions for programs, grants, and services to better take advantage of resources for the benefit of Latino students. The program's potential contributions has been seriously undermined by exclusion in recent years.

For example, in the case of the HSI funds the university received from the State Legislature two years ago. Instead of drawing from the already established collective of informed members of the advisory board to generate ideas to develop a systematic plan with concrete goals to use the funds, the administration followed an unsystematic and rather unplanned distribution of resources which unfortunately yielded little if any sustained benefit for our students and the university as a whole. I personally express this risk to the Provost at the time when the distribution was poorly done and suggested the need for concrete goals to be defined. Unfortunately, no such goals were set.

### **What is the current status of the LLAS major?**

The major has been improved by all committees internal to the university. For the last three months, however, we have worked on the application to be sent

to the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) for final approval. These files had to be reworked three times so far, because the office of the Provost provided different formats in these months, causing delays in the submission of the major. However, as of two weeks ago, we submitted a reformatted set of files that should be ready to be sent as soon as the administration proceeds with the final input of data regarding budgets and other institutional respects. As soon as the office of the Provost proceeds with that, we are uncertain, according to the Provost's own account, to how long the IBHE review process will last. I must add that in the last reformatting of the application, a stronger emphasis of the professional usefulness of the major was highlighted. However, given the uncertainty of the continuation of my role as coordinator at the moment, I have not been able to secure letters of commitment from community organizations, which would greatly strengthen the application for IBHE review.

The uncertainty of my future role as coordinator remains a mystery for me because the Provost has repeatedly refused to give me concrete reasons for his capricious intentions to remove me from the position. I have appealed to the President for her intervention in this matter and I trust I would be maintained as coordinator, given on the one hand my performance in these years as well as the unsound timeliness of changing

coordinators as the major is about to be launched. Particularly, when I have been so central in developing the proposal, the consistency of the program, and its relationship to community organizations that would play such an important role for the major as it is now and its vision.

### **What do you foresee as the future of the program?**

The creation of the major will be a watershed and a new phase for the program is at hand with greater institutional weight. In a recent meeting of the advisory board with President Hahs, we requested for the administration to create a course-release system for faculty involved with LLAS so that they can enhance the participation in the program. We're optimistic, given that the President seemed favorable to this idea and offered to provide administrative guidance for us to submit a proposal. We submitted a draft of the proposal for her input a month ago and we eagerly await for her guidance and support. With this more systematic and sustained support for faculty members in the consolidation of the program, I am certain that the great potential of the program will be actualized for the benefit of the students, the university, and the community at large. At this point faculty members who participate in the program do not really receive any recognition or compensation for most of their work.

## Interview with the Dean of Academic Development

# Dr. Daniel López



One way or another, all students at Northeastern Illinois University have come into contact with the work of Dr. Daniel López, the Dean of Academic Development since 2010. His position is responsible for overseeing such programs and initiatives like the Advisement Center, Assessment and Testing Development, Proyecto Pa'Lante, the Learning Center, TRIO, and the Summer Transition Program, to name a few. However, his work at NEIU did not begin just last year. Before his current job he was Associate Dean of Academic Development for seven years as well as the Director of El Centro, the

Latina/o-focused satellite campus of the university. In a series of articles that began in the February edition, *Que Ondee Sola* will highlight multiple figures that embody the Latina/o presence and persistence at the university. For this month's edition, it is our honor to highlight Dr. López, whose role is integral in guiding NEIU into a better place concerning its poor retention and graduation rates.

From humble roots in México to the South Side of Chicago to Central Illinois, this man with a tall stature but gentle personality has journeyed a long way to arrive where he is now, facing obstacles that many students at NEIU could relate to, such as an undocumented status, racism, and language barriers. We at *Que Ondee Sola* look forward to seeing how Dr. López will be able to transform the programs that students need in order to graduate and subsequently become transformative agents in wherever our community is present. With Dr. López in his current high-ranking position, NEIU, as an officially designated Hispanic Serving Institution, comes closer to achieving its promises to Latinas/os, a population that makes our university like no other.

**Tell me about yourself. What community did you grow up in and what is your educational**

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## and professional background?

I was born in México and came to the United States at the age of ten, living in California for a little bit. Being the youngest of ten children, I was suppose to be the spokesperson for the family and learn English quicker since I was young. We were also undocumented but got our citizenship through the amnesty deal in the 1980s. We grew-up in the Back of the Yards as one of the first Latino families there. In terms of school, I wanted to go to college because my family told me I needed to, but I did not get the correct support from high school. No one told me about the details of college. I learned about it through my peers. I originally applied to the University of Illinois at Chicago but the application was somehow lost, so I didn't go to school for what would've been my first semester. I just stayed home and watched commercials about Trade Schools.

Then one day I was downtown and saw a sign that said 'college' and it was an advertisement for Loop College (now Harold Washington) I went to the school and the receptionist immediately saw me and told me to wait and came back with a counselor, a woman named Inés Bocanegra Gordón. Within an hour she registered me for classes and became my mentor. Also, my tuition was paid for. Actually, even til this day I never had to pay for my education.

Subsequently, I was offered to work as a

student worker at the school and joined an organization for Latino students. Then, one day the President of the college asked to see me and told me that I was highly recommended and offered a position that would help recruit Black and Latino students to the City Colleges. This taught me that I could have a career working in higher education. Everything worked out perfectly.

After graduate school I applied to Illinois State and worked as an academic advisor and fell in love with the students. Many people would want me as an advisor because I was a Latino from the city and would line up in front of my office. My work allowed me to help others. It gave me an opportunity to help these students reach their potential and feel at home in college. It was so rewarding.

Afterwards, I worked as the Director of TRIO, a program to help first generation, low-income, and disabled student graduate in four years. Then I went to work as Associate Dean of the College of Lake Forest and the Director of the Multicultural Center.

## **Describe your work at El Centro? What were some of your achievements?**

I came to NEIU as an Associate Dean of Academic Development and was also asked to run El Centro temporarily. But I ended up working there for seven years. I enjoyed my years there and was



conflicted to leave, because we made great progress with connecting to the students, their families, and the community. When I came to El Centro, I was glad that my biggest promoter was the community, teachers, counselors, and community leaders.

**What is the task of the Dean of Academic Development? What are your major goals?**

I have an opportunity to oversee all these programs that the university has to offer that allow our students to be successful. Also, I work with Directors and eighty staff members to make sure our first priority is the students. We must think how everything we do will affect our students.

So far, we have a good structure in place, like Project Success and Proyecto Pa'Lante. But also, close to 80% of incoming students have to take developmental math courses. In our revised Summer Transition Program, we will focus on math, reading, and writing development workshops and strategies and then give students the placement test so they can skip a developmental course and be better prepared for the Fall. Also, starting in the Fall of 2011, Proyecto Pa'Lante will be officially following students until their graduation, instead of the current two

years.

**What steps do you believe need to be taken to make NEIU an institution of choice for Latinas/os, as stated in the university's Strategic Plan?**

For me, we already have that. We have been an institution of choice for Latinos for a long time. Latinos knew that NEIU was friendly to Latinos. I think its because of our mission. We have a strong presence in the community. Take El Centro and the Center for Inner City Studies and the services we have. People also know about NEIU through Proyecto Pa'Lante and *Que Ondee Sola*. NEIU and the community also know that this was a place for undocumented students.

**What has been your core values and goals throughout your professional career?**

As one of the highest ranking Latinos at NEIU, it is important for us [Latinos] to be in the decision-making process and to impact our greater community as a whole. It is about giving back and preparing the next generation of leaders. Also, I have to ask myself, how do I help students advance in their careers and contribute to our community.

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# Three *Little Known Latin American Nations*



## Uruguay



is located in the south east part of South America. The country is home to 3.5 million people, 1.8 million of which live in the capital, Montevideo. Their government is a presidential republic, meaning that Uruguay has president but the people still retain control of the government. Uruguay is one of the most economically

developed countries in South America and has the 52nd highest quality of life index in the world. Uruguay holds the 2nd place as the least corrupt countries in Latin America. Uruguay was the first South American country to legalize same-sex and different sex civil unions, allow gay adoption, and cultivate hemp. Uruguay is rooted in peace with the majority of the country's military is deployed as UN Peacemakers. The current president, Jose Mujica, is a former left-wing militant who spent 15 years in prison during the country's military rule. After Mujica was elected in 2009, every child was provided with a free laptop and wireless internet.

## Paraguay

is a landlocked country in South America surrounded by Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil. It is referred to as Corazón de

# Costa Rica

is located in Central America bordered by Nicaragua, Panama, Pacific Ocean, and the Caribbean Sea. Costa Rica constitutionally, permanently abolished its army in 1949. Costa Rica suffers with having the 4th highest inflation rate in Latin America. Since the country faces so many economical problems, Costa

Rica offers tax exemptions to whoever will invest in the country. Costa Rica strongly advocates human rights and peace. Costa Rica not only has a high tourist influx but it has also received 150,000 foreigners coming for its cheap and quality medical services. Universal public education is guaranteed in the Costa Rican constitution resulting in 94% literacy rate.



América due to its central location. The official languages of Paraguay are Spanish and Guaraní, which came from the indigenous peoples of the country. There is no official data of the ethnic composition of the Paraguayan population due to the fact that the concepts of race and ethnicity is not included in the census surveys.

Paraguay has a huge poor population with 41% in the rural population, but the literacy rate is at 93%. The country has the highest tax of South America at 9% but 41% percent of the rural population is poor. Despite the high percent of poor people, the literacy rate is 93%. Primary education lasts nine years and is free and mandatory. Paraguay has several universities with an enrollment rate at 88%.



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# 6th Annual Plantando Semillas

**KICK OFF EVENT for**

**40th ANNIVERSARY of**  
**Union for Puerto Rican Students**  
**and**  
**Que Ondee Sola**



Celebrating the Latina Presence and Persistence  
at Northeastern Illinois University.

Celebration and Presentation in Support of  
the NEW Latino Latin American Studies Major.

**Special Guest:** Carlos Alberto Torres - *Invited*



**APRIL 5TH**

**From 3:05 PM - 4:05 pm**



**Location: LWH Building Room 1002**  
**at Northeastern Illinois University**

**Free Food & Beverages Provided**

Organized by Que Ondee Sola Magazine and  
the Union for Puerto Rican Students