

# INVISIBLE & VOICELESS: LATINOS IN COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA 2013

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



OFFICE OF LATINO/LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES (OLLAS)  
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Civic and business leaders in Council Bluffs acknowledge the vital place of immigrants in the local economy. Latinos, too, feel they have 'won a place' in Council Bluffs as workers and consumers, but they also experience themselves as largely invisible and without a voice. Findings in this report are based on the analysis of transcripts of 26 semi-structured interviews with Council Bluffs civic, government, education, religious, non-profit, and business representatives, as well as meetings with Latino community members in two groups of about 30 each.

Funded in part by the Iowa West Foundation, researchers from the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) explored perceptions of the growth, challenges, and contributions of the Latino community in Council Bluffs, now 8.5% of the city's population (5,277 of 62,230) according to the 2010 U. S. census. We also sought to understand and shed light on Latino economic and civic participation or lack of participation, as well as institutional responses to the growing Latino presence.





## I. Economic Participation

Civic and business leaders acknowledge Council Bluffs employers' high level of dependence on immigrant workers and highlighted Latinos' strong work ethic. Leaders also recognized the difficult work conditions and undesirable wages faced by many Latino workers in Council Bluffs. Latinos acknowledge that they work very hard, sometimes performing the equivalent work of two or three other employees for the same pay. A Latino conversation participant concluded that this is what that has won Latinos a place in Council Bluffs. *"Eso es lo que nos ha hecho ganarnos un lugar."*

Though Latinos in Council Bluffs are valued for their contributions to the productivity and wealth generation of the community, few participate in decision making or ascend to levels of higher responsibility in industry or any of the city's basic institutions.

### ***The construction of a "trans-river community".***

The participation of Latinos living, earning, and spending in Council Bluffs is a component of a trans-river economic and social dynamic of two communities

in one metropolitan area. Latino workers sometimes live in Council Bluffs and work in Omaha and many Latinos live in Omaha and work in Council Bluffs or neighboring communities. Latinos from Council Bluffs frequent Latino-owned restaurants and stores densely located in South Omaha. Latinos are also known to shop at the large Council Bluffs discount stores easily accessible from South Omaha by highway. Regarding the presence of Council Bluffs Latino businesses, an elected official commented, "It's nice to see those businesses spring up here in the local community." But Latinos underscored obstacles faced in starting their own small businesses in Council Bluffs.

Council Bluffs' Latinos stated they need to travel to Omaha for services such as GED classes in Spanish, assistance with starting their own businesses, affordable urgent care center services, dance hall rentals, and for banking services. Latino community members pointed out that the identification card provided by the Mexican consulate, known in Spanish as '*la matricula consular*,' is recognized by many business establishments in Omaha, but not by businesses in Council Bluffs.

## II. Latino Participation in the Wider Community

This study also sought to shed light on how the Latino presence is perceived outside of participation in the economy, how basic institutions are responding, and how both Latinos and community leaders perceive attitudes and

interactions. Individual perceptions can be divided into three categories: 1) the invisibility of Latinos to stakeholders, 2) uninformed recognition of change, and 3) acceptance and openness to improving relations.



One business leader expressed his desire to support Latino businesspersons and integrate them into the life of the community, but also expressed frustration with not knowing how to bridge cultural differences. Another civic leader commented:

[There is a] long history of Latinos in Council Bluffs dating back to the railroad days when Council Bluffs was a significant railroad town and Union Pacific was a large employer. We have the Mexican American families that have been here for years and I know and am friends with some of them. And there's a new population, I know, but I don't really know much about them. You know, I see them working. I know from friends who are in the retail business that they're brand-loyal. I know from banking that they're honest people, and that they put in an honest day's work, but I really don't know much more than that. I think our low unemployment drives people to chase jobs and come here. I think they are doing OK in our schools. I don't know as much as I probably should.

Institutional practices also evidence a range from lack of awareness of need to initial efforts to serve and integrate the growing Latino immigrant population. The lack of bilingual personnel in Council Bluffs was a strong theme arising from community members at the "Community Conversation" held in November of 2012. Participants and interviewees described the serious consequences and fear of making mistakes, for example, signing papers in court or answering questions incorrectly without adequate interpretation. An elected city official demonstrated some awareness of the city's need for more bilingual government services. "I don't think we have enough employees in the city or in law enforcement that can communicate in Spanish." Bilingual services are provided in some area health care institutions including Jennie Edmundson Hospital and All Care Health Center.

The Adult Learning Center, administered by Iowa Western Community College and located in the Omni Center building, offers face-to-face English classes for adults in Council Bluffs at various levels and on different days and times. However, GED classes are not offered in Spanish in Council Bluffs, nor are Iowa residents allowed to take the test in Nebraska, though Nebraskans are permitted to take the test in Iowa. The nearest place to take the test in Spanish in Iowa is Sioux City.

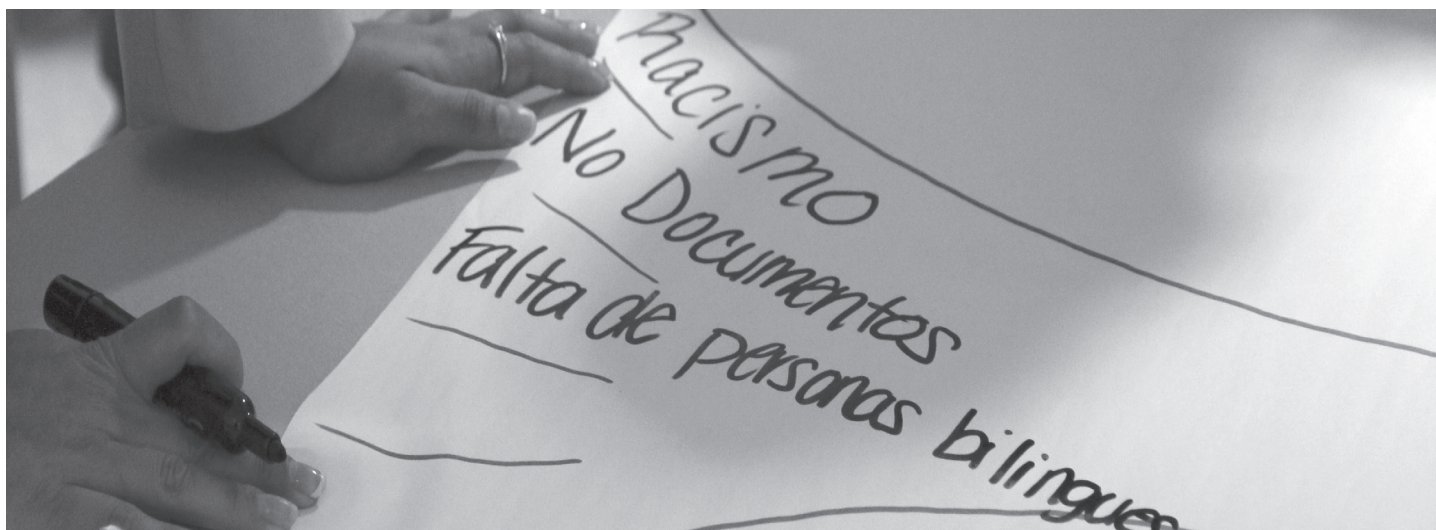
Iowa Workforce Development employs a coordinator for the New Iowans Program at the Council Bluffs office. This role is held by a Latina professional who has long been active and committed to the well-being of the Latino and broader immigrant community in Council Bluffs.

Fifteen percent (1,307) of the Council Bluffs Community School District population of 9,000 students identify as Hispanic and 647 are English Language Learners. The system employs one full-time Spanish interpreter.

Sunday Catholic services in Spanish are offered weekly at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church with an estimated participation of 400 individuals. An associate pastor who serves Latinos at Broadway Methodist church said his congregation of 150 to 200 includes Mexicans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, El Salvadorans, as well as families from the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Latino interviewees thought at least two evangelical churches also serve the Latino community.

### ***Spectrum of attitudes.***

Attitudes perceived on the part of non-Latino members of the Council Bluffs community regarding the presence of Latino immigrants varied widely ranging from hostility on one end of an attitude spectrum, to appreciation and desire for more effective welcome and integration on the other end.





In the view of one community leader, the integration of Latinos is part of on-going class and cultural segregation challenges in Council Bluffs. Another civic leader expressed the view that Latinos are assimilating well into the Council Bluffs community. An educational leader seemed grateful for at least a minimum of what he is convinced is a kind of tolerance.

Hostility/ Discriminatory	Tolerance
Ambivalence/ Confusion	Interest
Acceptance Welcome	Appreciation
Desire for Integration	Commitment to Integration

He stated that at least in Council Bluffs there is “never overt hostility.” He views immigrants as bringing drive and initiative into the community, but worries that fear keeps people from building fruitful relationships. He hopes the wider community can learn to relax, to accept, and to embrace new immigrants.

In answer to a question about what strengths Latinos bring to the community, the educator emphasized their sense of adaptability and adventure, their strong sense of family and extended family, and their eagerness to learn and succeed. The Hispanic minister of the Catholic church admires the resilience, goodness, and mutual respect he sees in members of the Latino immigrant community he has grown to know.

***Superficial interactions between communities.***

In addition to perceptions and attitudes, this study also sought to identify behaviors that exemplify interactions taking place between Latinos and non-Latinos. Very few spaces were identified where Latinos and non-Latinos interact meaningfully. Four kinds of interaction were perceived: Latinos receiving services from the dominant community, Latinos providing service to the dominant community, Latinos and others interacting side by side and attempts at more mutually beneficial exchanges.

**III. Latino Experience and Desire for a Voice**

If the level of interaction between Latinos and the wider community is a measure, the place Latinos have won in Council Bluffs is limited and tenuous. This section of the report seeks to illuminate this further by focusing on Latino views, experiences, initiatives, and aspirations, gathered mainly during the two “Community Conversations” held at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church in November 2012 and January 2013 and attended by 61 Latino community members.

***Motivation for immigrating.***

Latinos stressed that their fundamental motivation for leaving their countries of origin is to forge a future for their children with a better quality of life. “We are here and we are well.”

***Skills Latinos bring and struggles encountered.***

Many spoke about the struggle of dealing with deep frustrations facing barriers of language and immigration status and in some cases feeling incapable of finding jobs to utilize their knowledge and skills due to these barriers.

Participants were mystified why the government does not seem to see the benefits of passing immigration reform with a path to citizenship. One participant said the first thing he would do after obtaining his ‘papers’ would be to buy a house for his family. He thought there would be many benefits for the country.

Beyond frustration, other Latinos described painful experiences of being mistreated. One woman during table presentations at the November Community Conversation stated simply, “We do not feel comfortable in Council Bluffs.” Another said she and many other Latinos feel “impotent” especially “not being able to defend ourselves from those who insult us.” What makes life difficult, participants explained, are experiences of racism and discrimination, not being able to obtain immigration authorization, the lack of bilingual personnel, and the bad reputation Latinos are sometimes given just for being Latinos. Another participant pointed to the abuse experienced by Latinos at work. He speculated that at the root of this problem is the lack of knowledge of labor rights, the fear people have of losing their jobs, as well as the lack of confidence with

the language, and again, lack of 'documents.' During a separate interview, this participant agreed that life here has been difficult. "I have had many injuries here. People are mistreated here." He also thought that being from different countries of origin (e.g. Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala) makes it difficult for workers to know each other well and to help each other in the workplace.

### **Latino initiative.**

Regarding ways Latinos have demonstrated leadership to improve the situation for their community in Council Bluffs, one example was the success of obtaining a Catholic service in Spanish in 2009 after collecting hundreds of signatures and presenting them to the Bishop of the Des Moines Catholic Diocese. At this Spanish worship service, researchers observed leadership participation from males and females of various ages in a variety of ministry roles.

Individual Latino advocates have also served the community over the years through various institutions including the Centro Latino. One adult educator and advocate was mentioned by both Latinos and non-Latinos for her initiatives and effective service to the Latino community of Council Bluffs. Individual Latino entrepreneurs have founded and led their businesses

in the community, employing others, and contributing to Latino groups such as athletic clubs or school events. In 2013, Latino students and staff supporters at Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson high Schools formed Latino clubs to promote Latino culture and academic advancement.

### **Desire for a voice – Civic participation.**

Latinos expressed a desire for a voice and role in the broader Council Bluffs community. Latino participants recognized they need to put in effort to obtain the tools to help their own community including the development of English language skills, knowledge of their rights, and encouragement of their children to stay in school and become bilingual professionals. Conversation participants recognized that no Latino-led organization exists in Council Bluffs promoting Latino civic engagement. Latinos see the need to organize a group to help them unite, to help them learn about and defend their rights, to support each other in learning English, and to give their community a stronger voice. Latinos expressed the desire for a Latino-led organization in Council Bluffs with the purpose of helping Latino community members develop their capacity to identify issues they wish to change and develop the leadership and power to make those changes.

## **Recommendations for Promotion of Latino Integration and Civic Participation in Council Bluffs, Iowa**

- Support the development of a Council Bluffs Latino community organization.
- Facilitate access to instruction for GED in Spanish. *"Lo que quiero es educarme y ojalá se pueda hacer que se saque la GED aquí en este estado en español."*
- Evaluate English-learning offerings and expand where needed and support the preservation of heritage languages (Spanish in this case).
- Explore collaborations to promote adult education and career development (e.g. literacy, citizenship, GED, career counseling, technical training) among educational institutions and businesses that employ large numbers of Latinos.
- Recognize and support growth of positive immigrant integration efforts through Iowa Workforce Development, Iowa Western Community College, and other institutions.
- Identify top needs for bilingual personnel and processes in public offices (e.g. schools, Department of Motor Vehicles, services such as business licenses).
- Support the development of Latino-led organization and effective leadership in Council Bluffs.
- Support Latino clubs in the high schools and development of middle school, high school, and young adult groups in the churches. Encourage and facilitate involvement in the community.
- Build on cultural competency and bilingual skills of youth and young adults; devote resources to career counseling; provide support to help them envision and follow through on careers to help their community.
- Identify and mentor Latino students from Council Bluffs currently in college or recently graduated. Facilitate service-learning, internships, employment to benefit the integration and civic participation of the Council Bluffs Latino community.
- Create internships and decent jobs in public offices and businesses where high school and college-age Latinos can begin to help meet community needs, develop professional interests, learn skills, receive mentoring and recognition of their own value.



- Prioritize hiring of Latino professionals in schools to build on the power of social learning and role-modeling. Research why it is difficult to recruit and keep minority teachers and other professionals and what could impact this positively.
- Identify the talent and skills Latino immigrants bring from their home countries and previous employment. Survey how many owned land, initiated and ran businesses, farmed or ranched, practiced local arts, or utilized special skills in their work. Strategize how the Council Bluffs community might create avenues for immigrants to contribute more of these skills and abilities.
- Recognize and reward current bilingual employees for the value they add in facilitating integration of Spanish-dominant employees or customers. Promote discussion among employers regarding the benefits of hiring bilingual and bicultural personnel and ways to measure and reward their work-place contributions.
- Evaluate and acknowledge city exclusionary practices, policies, and attitudes both institutional and interpersonal. Identify goals for cultural vitality and economic vitality and steps that can be taken to achieve those goals. Seek guidance from groups such as <http://citiesofmigration.ca/good-ideas-in-integration/> Explore UNESCO's "Universal declaration on cultural diversity" for language helpful to develop vision.
- Facilitate Latino involvement in Council Bluffs Community Pride Week. One Latino interviewee envisioned Latinos marching with a banner with a message of unity in the "Celebrate CB Parade."
- Explore ways to promote immigrant microbusiness training, development, and access to loans.
- Consider the benefits of promoting a Latino business district as well as street vendor permits.
- Evaluate affordable housing availability. Facilitate immigrant home-buying.
- Facilitate savings and lending services using the Mexican CID or Consular Identification Card provided by Mexican Consulate offices. In Spanish this is the Matrícula Consular de Alta Seguridad (MCAS) or commonly called 'la matricula consular.'
- Involve Latinos in the mayoral campaign and other local political campaigns. Help the newly elected mayor develop clear community messaging: Immigration brings vitality to all. Educate. Train staff in deliberative thinking. Ground staff in demographic and sociological data and research. Practice until a positive perspective becomes channelized and automatic to counter negative

thoughts which are culturally supported, habitual, and affect policy choices even if they are unworkable and unproductive. (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002)

- Promote patriotism, but not a blind patriotism that is resistant to change. Promote a 'constructed patriotism' which sees the country as constantly improving itself with the resources of all. (Spry & Hornsey, 2007)
- Adopt an attitude that it is okay for people to be uncomfortable, to feel the loss of the 'coziness' of past homogeneity, but embraces the idea that immigration does not have to be accompanied by racism and discrimination. Immigration brings cultural vitality and is the viable path for communities in the modern world. (See Portes & Vickstrom, 2011)

**When asked about ideas of projects that might promote positive interaction between communities, research participants offered the following ideas:**

- Engage Latinos in carrying a banner in the parade and selling food in the annual Council Bluffs Pride celebration
- Host a culture or diversity fair in town
- Involve Latinos in local and regional agriculture initiatives and farmers' markets
- Educate people about the advantages of a diverse workforce
- Bring people together, inform them, ask for their input, for example with surveys and town hall meetings
- Share histories of how various immigrant groups came to Council Bluffs
- One research participant admitted, I "don't know how to go about doing that... to engage, connect, involve...."

**Other ideas focused on ways to improve life for Latinos:**

- Make available GED classes in Spanish
- Develop scholarship programs like the Omaha Barrientos scholarships
- Have a meeting for the Latino community to present and learn about existing resources and welcoming spaces
- Clarify parenting practices and laws that parents need to understand to avoid problems with police
- Develop part-time jobs for youth to help the community and gain skills
- Connect professional Latinos in Omaha with those in Council Bluffs
- Develop a group for "Latinos in Council Bluffs to unite, to be heard, to motivate us to learn and defend ourselves more."



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