

## Three Dimensions of Place-Based Learning at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

By Dr. Benjamin Waddell and Pauline Victoria Martinez

The best predictor of a nation's future is found in the classroom. In this sense, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are in a unique position to shape the future of the US. As a group, Hispanics make up roughly 18% of the nation's population, and they are projected to account for nearly 30% by 2050. With a median age of 27, Hispanics are also the youngest demographic group in the country. Still, while they represent the nation's largest minority group, among 25-29 year olds only 15% of Hispanics graduate from college, compared with 20% of Blacks, 40% of Whites, and 58% of Asians ([US Census](#)).

The cultural, economic, and political future of the US will be deeply intertwined with the educational experience of Hispanics and Latinos. As they say, demography is destiny.

As of early 2016, there were nearly 300 HSI-eligible institutions in the U.S., and while their student bodies may share many common linguistic, religious, and cultural traits, they are also unique. Like [Dr. Leslie D. Gonzales](#), we believe that incorporating the rich diversity of Hispanics and Latinos into the HSI mission is as important as recognizing the group's shared values. [Available research](#) confirms our notion, revealing that curriculum is most effective when it takes into account the specific history and culture of students. To this end, we propose place-based learning (PBL) as a means of incorporating pan-ethnic diversity into the HSI mission.

PBL requires institutions to synchronize its educational mission with local traditions, history, culture, and community. PBL pushes universities and colleges, as well as their stakeholders, to focus on learning from the ground up by incorporating locals (students, community members, and instructors), into a learning structure that is focused on developing human capital at the local level. We believe that PBL has the potential to empower local communities while promoting integration between local, regional, and global issues.

There are three core dimensions to PBL that we would like to highlight as they relate to HSIs. Each dimension is outlined in Figure 1 as well.

- Dimension 1 requires HSIs to recognize the value of local knowledge and experience by promoting learning within local communities as a means of forging a deeper connection between students and residents, and in this manner, validating local knowledge and experiences.
- Dimension 2 calls for firm investments in human capital at the local level in order to promote quality leadership within HSI communities.
- Dimension 3 supports the preservation of local culture and history by promoting student-led research and learning within the communities connected to HSIs.

[Figure 1 about here]

In the space that remains, we would like to share our experience of incorporating PBL into the San Luis Valley, which is situated in Southern Colorado, and is served by Adams State University (ASU), which is Colorado's largest HSI. Our work, which is generously supported by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Title V, and the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, began in 2014 with Dr. Waddell's Field Studies in Sociology course. The course was designed to provide students with the opportunity to engage in PBL by conducting in-depth interviews with local residents in the San Luis Valley. In our work we aimed to address several core questions:

How do historical legacies and culture tendencies affect our relationship with the land we live on? Furthermore, how do issues like poverty, inequality, and ethnic heritage influence the way we interact with the natural environment?

To answer these questions, we worked alongside students in filming interviews with over 20 residents of the San Luis Valley. With our footage, we created a short documentary, *[Voices of the Valley](#)*, which went on to win “Best Picture” at the Southern Colorado Film Festival in 2015. In time, we intend to create an online archive of our interviews that will be available to local educators and their students.

Currently, we are in the second year of our project, and alongside our students, we are researching the compounding effects of discriminatory lending within our community. Specifically, during the 2016 spring semester our students are conducting interviews revolving around the people’s connection to land, and related to the effect that discrimination and land loss has had on Hispanic communities in the SLV. With our latest project, we plan to produce a feature-length documentary as well as generate curriculum for local educators that incorporates our interviews and film.

### **DIMENSION ONE:**

We believe that PBL allows the HSI to develop relationships with community members by recognizing their long-held and deep connections to their community. In doing so, the HSI establishes deeper connections to local organizations, government, and residents, thus positioning itself as a hub of innovation, historical preservation, and curator of information.

At ASU PBL has provided a network of connections and relationships not otherwise possible. We have found that community members embrace our work, and just as importantly, our project appears to encourage locals to use their voice. At the end of the day, PBL fosters deeper trust between the university and the community.

### **DIMENSION TWO:**

PBL promotes the development of human capital in both minority and non-minority students. Our students report that the experience of becoming researchers in the place they call home is very empowering. For example, they report feeling a deeper connection to their history and a sense of pride in their community. Students also gain tangible skills, such as improved oral communication, heightened self-awareness, and stronger analytical abilities. Regardless of where students end up, these are skills that they will take with them. In this sense, students also come to realize that local knowledge has the potential to have impact outside their community.

One local student, Stefan Armenta, who is from the small town of Antonito, shared his experience with us following the course.

“You’re going out into the field and interviewing people that come from a diverse background. The exciting part was learning more about my cultural roots, going back to where I come from, and the traditions of my people. This work can impact students from the Valley and those not from here, because what we have is something to cherish.”

Another student, Bella Whitten, who is from outside the SLV, compared the work to creating a living textbook. “Reading about the history of a place is not the same as hearing people’s passion as they tell their actual stories.”

Bella has now graduated and is a teacher in Denver. She said, “The way that I’m going to use this class is to get to know the culture of where I’m at. I’m excited to show them [her students] these videos.”

### **DIMENSION THREE:**

All too often the dominant historical narrative is inscribed into the social psyche—through popular culture, the media, education, and so on—and as a result, we tend to forget history as it actually took place. This is particularly true when it comes to the history of the oppressed. Through our interviews we have heard inspiring stories of struggles for civil justice. A good example of this is found in 76-year-old Alsonzo Abeyta, who is from Mogote, CO.

“I was devastated. It was 1961. I’d just finished serving my country. I was a U.S. marine but I’d been raised a farmer. That’s all I knew, and so when they told me that I wouldn’t be able to get the money I needed to run the operation it was devastating. I had to pack up and take my family to Denver to find work. I had to give up my way of life because this man didn’t want to loan me money. And when I went to leave the man turned to me and said, ‘Look, your people are made to work the land, not own it.’ That’s what he told me. I remember it was if it were yesterday. I never forgot that moment.”

Still, while Alfonso left in search of work, he never gave up the fight to change the injustices he saw.

“My father’s a fighter. He always has been, and I think that’s why he never let go,” said Aaron Abeyta, Alfonso’s youngest son. Recently, Alfonso and his sons were part of a settlement with the USDA in which, despite extremely high burdens of proof, the Abeytas were able to demonstrate that they had been systematically discriminated against for decades. As Alfonso pointed out in his interview, the settlement would never make up for the wrongs committed against their communities, but it is nonetheless important because it sets a precedent moving forward.

“It was never about the money,” Mr. Abeyta said near the end of our conversation. “It was about [doing] what is right.”

Standing up for what is right in face of great adversity has been a common theme in our interviews. For example interviewees spoke about education; folk music and dancing; local Hispanic traditions; religion; culture; the people’s fight to keep access to water and land; the Chicano movement; and the local dialect of the Spanish language, which is both endangered and unique to this region.

Lillian Gomez, a local educator from San Luis, CO, and the current co-director of Title V grants at ASU, spoke to us about the Chicano movement and the fight to regain access to traditional lands. The land she spoke of had been granted to the people through the Costilla Land grant when Southern Colorado was still part of Mexico, but over time, the land was usurped from local residents. Regarding the fight for social justice she said that at a young age she realized that time is of essence when it comes to doing what is right. “If not us, who? And if not now, when?” Gomez said as she closed out her interview with us.

In addition to capturing the resilient spirit of Hispanic residents in the SLV, our interviews have shed light on the deep connection many people feel for this valley. “As long as I’m in the Valley I’m at home,” said Charlie Jaquez, a long-time educator, and resident from the small town of San Luis. “It doesn’t matter where it is, because the mountains are always there to tell you where you are. There is a spiritual connection that’s kind of hard to explain.”

The deep connection to this valley was a sentiment echoed by all our interviewees both those who were born and raised here, and also by those whom have migrated here from other parts of the world. It is a connection that sparks a passion in the people from the valley, but is also capable of inspiring those beyond the valley.

Through our research we have found that people have many stereotypes when it comes to rural communities, and in particular, rural communities of color. Generally, the official story is one that focuses on poverty, lack of resources, health disparities, and substance abuse. There is truth to some of these, but they are dangerous narratives, because they push aside the rich cultural capital woven into the social fabric of rural communities.

As local resident Olive Valdez said in a speech at the 1995 National Rural Conference held in Ames, Iowa,

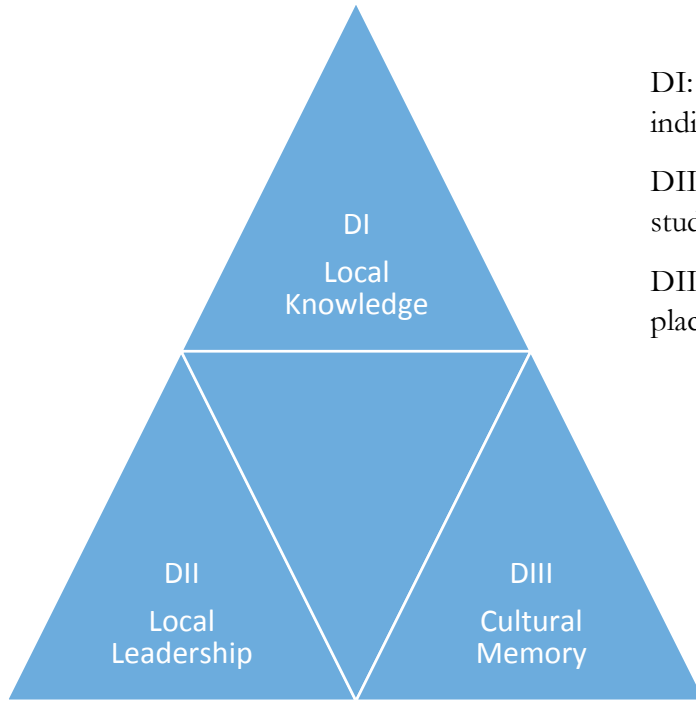
"We are not poor people, we just don't have any money. What I mean is that we are rich in culture, rich in natural resources, and rich in heritage. We in the (San Luis) valley want to work and make our own way."

Olive's speech left President Clinton speechless, and inspired a loud round of applause. Like Olive, we believe there are multiple ways to measure wealth within communities.

In summary, we think that PBL has the potential to weave local value into HSIs, and in doing so, help educators better serve their student bodies. Through PBL, and the lens of common human dignity, an HSI can discover the pan-ethnic intersections that make each HSI so special. In the long run, we believe that PBL can contribute to improving educational outcomes, and in doing so, secure a better future for our nation.

Figure 1: The Three Dimensions of Place-Based Learning

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DI: Establish local roots through indigenous research and teaching.

DII: Develop human capital in local students and leaders.

DIII: Contribute to the preservation of place.

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Source: Authors.

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