

The Morris Intercultural Education Initiative: A Decade of Advancing Democracy Through Community-Engaged Learning in the Rural Midwest

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Abstract

While ethnoracial diversity is associated with metropolitan areas in the popular imagination, Latinx people have been moving increasingly into rural spaces during this century. Rural communities often have less infrastructure to adapt to changing linguistic and intercultural circumstances than do their urban counterparts. Following a community needs and assets assessment, the Morris Intercultural Education Initiative (MIEI) was founded in 2013 as a collaboration between the University of Minnesota Morris Clifford J. Benson Center for Community Partnerships, the local Latinx population, and the area school district to address disparities in literacy and academic outcomes and to promote community integration in West Central Minnesota. MIEI currently administers four programs: Community English as a Second Language, the Teaching Reading and Empowering Children program, the Jane Addams Project for intercultural exchange, and the Tercero Community Interpreter Workshop Series. This retrospective article explores the genesis and organic responsiveness of MIEI programs through Freirean praxis and offers wisdom to those who wish to pursue similar projects in their own communities. Reflecting on their own problematic positionality as relatively privileged professional intellectuals in an intercultural rural environment, the authors argue that it is important to understand others in terms of the strengths and assets that they contribute to efforts to build culturally agile, democratic institutions.

This article explores the development of the Morris Intercultural Education Initiative (MIEI) in Morris, Minnesota, a suite of programs originally intended to support literacy and improve academic outcomes among Latinx youth in the local school district. Ten years after the initiative's creation, a retrospective analysis of the organic growth of collaborations among Latinx community members, the local school district, and the university demonstrates how MIEI supports democratic engagement and community integration in our small town. MIEI is administered by the University of Minnesota (UMN) Morris Clifford J. Benson Center for Community Partnerships and a group of faculty, staff, and university student interns. It is funded through a series of generous grants from the Otto Bremer Trust. MIEI includes four programs: the Community English as a Second Language (ESL) program, the Teaching Reading and Empowering Children (TREC) Program, the Jane Addams Project, and the Tercero Community Interpreter Workshop Series. Grounded in Paolo Freire's principles of ethically engaged dialogue, our collective efforts have fostered communication and strengthened relationships.

MIEI emerged through grassroots engagement and strategic partnerships among local stakeholders, including the Latinx community,

the university's Benson Center, Morris Area Schools and Morris Area Community Education, and *Conexiones*, a local nonprofit dedicated to assisting the Latinx community. We begin by describing the Morris community and situating these stakeholders geographically and in terms of relationships. We next describe MIEI, which refers to both an initial needs and assets assessment and to the suite of community-engaged programs intended to address the assessment's findings. We then discuss some of the challenges inherent in sustaining MIEI programs in our small town, how we measure and understand the impact of MIEI programs, and the most useful lessons we have learned over the decade since their creation. In this way, we advance a conversation about how university community engagement efforts can advance the autonomy and agency of immigrant populations in rural spaces where Latinx people are frequently underserved despite their growing numbers and importance to regional economies and communities.

Background: Setting and Stakeholders in Morris, Minnesota

Morris, Minnesota, population 5,206, is located 50 miles east of the South Dakota border and 135 miles west of Minneapolis and serves

as the administrative center for Stevens County, Minnesota. Measuring 5 square miles, Morris is quite walkable for most of the year, despite typical Minnesota winters. Community assets include a college, a medical center, a horticulture and children's garden, and a recreational center. Key partners in MIEI are located only yards apart on the east side of town.

The Latinx Community

Latinx people have been moving to Stevens County and Morris, Minnesota, since the early 2000s in pursuit of employment opportunities, a reasonable cost of living, and quality of life. Jobs in industrial agriculture—particularly in dairy farms—have been a key factor in this growth. Today, more than 10% of Stevens County is Latinx, as are 22% of students enrolled in the local school district (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).¹ The Latinx population not only sustains industrial agriculture and manufacturing in the region but also influences decisions about the local school district and community resources such as the recreational center and the farmer's market.

Conexiones

Conexiones is a nonprofit organization founded in 2017 that serves Stevens and Swift Counties in West Central Minnesota by supporting immigrant families as they learn how to navigate life in a new country. *Conexiones* works “to build a stronger, more united community,” providing relocation services, health education, cultural activities, and support to local schools for working effectively with (im)migrant families (*Conexiones - Stevens County, Minnesota*, n.d.).

UMN Morris

Consistently ranked among the top 10 public liberal-arts colleges nationwide, UMN Morris is one of five campuses in the University of Minnesota system and serves as a center of arts and culture for West Central Minnesota. UMN Morris has achieved national and international recognition for its sustainability efforts and

prides itself on providing a small, liberal arts experience at a fraction of the cost of comparable private colleges. As at other public universities, the student body at UMN Morris is increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity and cultural, educational, and socioeconomic family background. Since students most often leave the area after they graduate, mobility is a defining feature of our small community.

The grounds of what is today the Morris campus were once a boarding school for American Indian children, a colonial legacy that the state recognizes with UMN Morris's founding commitment to provide a full tuition waiver to any student who can demonstrate affiliation with a federally recognized tribe. As a result, today nearly a third of UMN Morris students hail from 70 Native Nations. While MIEI focuses on Latinx migrants and not U.S. Indigenous populations, it is motivated by a similar desire to recognize West Central Minnesota as a zone of cultural contact.²

The UMN Morris Benson Center for Community Partnerships

The UMN Morris Clifford J. Benson Center for Community Partnerships “fosters campus-community collaborations to address needs in small towns” of 10,000 or fewer across the state and “works toward more vibrant and equitable rural communities” by assessing community-identified needs and strategic planning; partnering to reach goals; and sharing outcomes, processes, and support with other small communities (Center for Small Towns | University of Minnesota Morris, n.d.). Each year, the Benson Center employs between 60–100 student interns, involves more than 250 students in community projects, engages 20–40 faculty, and collaborates with 50–80 community organizations.

Morris Area Schools and Morris Area Community Engagement

Morris Area Schools serves nearly 1,100 students from pre-K through 12th grade in two adjoined buildings. Featuring a concert hall and

¹ Student demographics are obtained from the district's internal records and provided annually to the MIEI steering group by the school's cultural liaison.

² In interpellating “zones of cultural contact,” we draw on Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) ontology of the U.S./Mexico border as well as Canadian anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt's (1992) notion of the “contact zone,” or “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (p. 4).

multiple gymnasias, Morris Area Schools facilities are a central gathering place in Morris where arts and athletic programming runs well past the end of most school days. Morris Area Schools has offered bilingual early childhood education since 2009 and maintains an English Language Learning teacher, a cultural liaison for Latinx families, and another cultural liaison for Native American families.

Morris Area Community Education, which hosts dozens of early childhood, youth, and adult enrichment programs per year, is housed within the elementary school. Many programs are sustained thanks to university student interns sponsored by the Benson Center, which partners with Morris Area Schools in a variety of ways, such as supporting after-school programs, providing enrichment activities for learners of all ages, and assisting with grant proposals. Fifty-two Morris Area Schools teachers and administrators were interviewed or participated in a focus group as part of the needs and assets assessment that resulted in MIEI, playing a key role in identifying issues that could be addressed through community-university partnerships.

Theoretical Approach: Models for Democratic Engagement

The theoretical framing for MIEI was largely inspired by early blunders of academics affiliated with the initiative. Invited to speak at the local school, we organized a workshop on intercultural competence, complete with a demonstration of how to work with a community interpreter. This last section was particularly fraught, as the audience objected to everything from the ethical imperative to interpret everything that is said in a conversation to the trainer's "flashy" shirt. Participant feedback from this session was not overwhelmingly positive.

On another occasion, when MIEI presented the initial findings of its community needs and assets assessment via a series of public events, including a bilingual public presentation, some Latinx participants shared privately that their employers had talked to them about how Latinx people should not be criticizing the community. Understandably, this admonishment made them fearful for their employment and hesitant to continue their involvement with MIEI. In our small town, maintaining one's anonymity is a self-protective gesture, and informal feedback loops are necessary.

In recent years, anthropologists have begun calling such stances "ethnographic refusals"

(Shange, 2019; Simpson, 2017). The term represents a variation on Herbert Marcuse's notion of the "Great Refusal," or an opting out of the institutions of liberal democracy (Marcuse, 1969a). The German American philosopher sees noncompliance as an ethical response to nonelites' disenfranchisement from the establishment of a hegemonic culture that is rigged against them. This "agentic absence" (Shange, 2019, p. 15) represents "an option for producing and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions away from and in critical relationship to states," represented in this instance by the land-grant university (Simpson, 2017, p. 19).

Clearly, not all refusals are created equally; like Marcuse (1969b) and, we suspect, many contemporary anthropologists, we recognize the power differentials between the local school educators and the immigrant laborers in the examples cited above. At the same time, however, both groups had good reason to distrust us. As intellectual outsiders to the community—none of the MIEI members are from Morris, Minnesota, and while several of us are Latinx, none of us are racialized laborers—we had not fully considered the potential negative repercussions of our projects on the local population. Even documented immigrants are in a precarious position, as their continued lawful status and economic survival in the United States are often tied to their relationship with a particular employer.

The teachers, meanwhile, likely took offense to our lecturing. They were, we would learn, generally eager to learn how to better serve Latinx students and communicate with their families. For example, one teacher suggested that, in addition to an interpreter, if teachers understood "more about [immigrants'] medical illness beliefs" and "what school systems are like in Mexico, how they function," they might be better equipped to help students adjust. What teachers objected to was our prescriptive, "sage on the stage" positioning. Workshop attendance was required for all school personnel; we were literally speaking to them—rather than with them—from a stage. As academics who participate in community from within an institution of higher education, we had failed to engage in ways that were "mutually beneficial, nonpaternalistic, and respectful" (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998, p. 121).

With time, we have come to understand the need for cultural humility in our work. Easier said than done, exercising cultural humility entails "examining equity and social justice issues within

and outside cultural experiences.” This disposition invites “self-awareness and reflection on how culture impacts practice” (Schuldborg et al., 2012, p. 18). We have adopted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s (1970/2005) formulation of *engajamento* (engagement/commitment) as a guiding framework for our research methodologies and ongoing implementation. Freire posits “critical and liberatory dialogue” (p. 63) among equals, rather than an agenda imposed on the community by a group of intellectuals, as the foundation of common liberation and social transformation (p. 120). In a small town like Morris, Minnesota, Freire’s “dynamic pedagogy” (p. 94) calls for the university and the local community to cooperate as partners in a project of naming and describing inequitable conditions in the community and then working together to change them. Rather than bridging a “town/gown divide”—which is shorthand for a variety of real and imagined social rifts that may insulate a college campus from the surrounding community—Freirean engagement prompts our efforts to obviate it as we reposition ourselves as fellow learners who are working within, rather than above or adjacent to, the community.

MIEI Research Phase I: A Community Needs and Assets Assessment

Implicit in the theoretical models discussed above, the validation of the other as a copartner in community building represents MIEI’s foundational departure from the “grim” narratives surrounding Latinx education that were circulating throughout the United States at the time our work began (Manolis et al., 2014, p. 15). More than a decade ago, in 2010, Patricia Gándara painted a “troubling picture,” noting that, “although a large gap exists between the college completion rates of whites and blacks, both groups show steady growth. However, the growth in college degrees for Latinos is almost flat” (n.p.). Indeed, in a 2009 study for the Pew Research Center, Mark Hugo Lopez found that “less than one in three (29%) immigrant Latinos ages 18 to 25 say they plan to get a bachelor’s degree” (pp. 1–2). Similarly, “Latinos ages 18 to 24 are less likely to say they are currently enrolled in school than all young adults

ages 18 to 24—33% versus 42%” (Lopez, 2009, p. 4). The contrast is even more stark for foreign-born young adults, of whom only 20% were registered at an educational institution (Lopez, 2009, p. 4). When asked to explain this achievement gap, 44% of young Latino respondents cited “the different cultural backgrounds of Hispanic students and their teachers,” while 43% mentioned “the limited English skills of Hispanic students” (Lopez, 2009, p. 5). Importantly, “among Latino youths who have a high school education or less and are not currently enrolled in school[,] ... half (49%) say their English skills are limited” (Lopez, 2009, p. 6).

Importantly, though long regarded as a bastion of progressivism in the Midwest, Minnesota suffers from some of the most persistent racial achievement gaps in the United States. For example, while 63.7% of White children in the state attend preschool, only 9.9% of Latinx children do (Office for Civil Rights, 2020). Meanwhile, while 64% of White third graders are proficient in reading and 64% of White eighth graders are proficient in math, only 33% of Latinx students tested met those benchmarks (Liuzzi, 2021). These differences lead to severe consequences as students get older; while 84% of White high-school students in Minnesota graduate within 4 years, only 70% of Latinx students do so—the largest gap of any state reporting data (Minnesota Compass, n.d.).³

Prompted by these trends, in 2013, MIEI was formed to discuss challenges facing immigrants living in our area. After a series of meetings, the Benson Center applied for an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) intern, and Phase I of the initiative, a year-long community needs and assets assessment, was undertaken.⁴ While researchers did not dispute the statistics that inform the national conversation on Latinx education, they were concerned about the deficit-based thinking implicit in this narrative. MIEI sought to challenge it with “an asset-based education narrative” and set out to develop short- and long-term recommendations to improve experiences and outcomes at the local school. While differences in native language and culture are seen as barriers to creating a positive educational experience, local researchers

³ On the challenges facing the state in its efforts to close these achievement gaps, see Campuzano (2022).

⁴ AmeriCorps VISTA is a federal program aimed at reducing poverty by expanding organizational capacity to create social change in areas that affect poverty, including education (*AmeriCorps VISTA*, n.d.).

sought to demonstrate that they contribute to relationship building and learning (Manolis et al., 2014, p. 16).

The interdisciplinary needs and assets assessment comprised several community-based research projects. Preliminary interviews and focus groups conducted in Spanish and English in 2012 by Spanish-speaking faculty including coauthor Roberts and undergraduate students produced a history of Latinx experiences in Morris. In 2013, newly hired coauthor Ortiz began implementing community-engaged learning projects coordinated among anthropology, psychology, and Spanish courses. These efforts sought to understand the local school environment and contribute to a needs and assets report. Undergraduate research assistants, faculty, and staff involved in the project conducted direct observations at the public school, focus groups and interviews with teachers, as well as participant observations and interviews with Latinx families. These methodological choices emerged from practical considerations of available resources, including the labor of students in coursework with service-learning or methodological practice components, and a commitment to equity and advocacy (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

Particularly, the research team recognized that existing program assessment focused on feedback from community members who were already participating in programming but did not include community members who experienced barriers to participation or, perhaps in an act of refusal, chose not to participate. In response to this dynamic, researchers reached beyond their existing relationships and expanded recruitment beyond existing social connections. Moreover, they worked to minimize barriers to participation and to maximize community members' ability to express themselves as fully and freely as possible. Research depended heavily on the availability of researchers with Spanish-language skills and relationships of trust within the Latinx community. Combining formal and primarily quantitative program evaluation metrics collected by the Benson Center with qualitative data collected from a broader sample of community members allowed researchers to develop a deeper understanding of activities and relationships at work in the community.

Statistical information on Latinx participation in the school community delivered a mixed message. On the one hand, in 2014, only 12.9% of qualifying Latinx students received targeted

services; only five out of the 71 students in an after-school homework-support program were Latinx. On the other hand, while Latinx students made up only 10% of the student body in 2014, 25% of parent volunteers were Latinx. Similarly, while the MIEI report acknowledges that Latinx students in Morris were performing better academically than the state average, they still were obtaining lower scores than White students in the district (Manolis et al., 2014, pp. 18–19). Researchers surmised that local resources were creating a more positive educational environment for Latinx students in Morris than in many schools across the country. Comparatively good performance motivated researchers to do even better.

In interviews with MIEI researchers, both school personnel and Latinx families confirmed much of what Lopez (2009) had found on the national level. Participants identified language access and knowledge of U.S. educational culture as barriers to further advancing Latinx education and the fuller integration of Spanish-speaking families in the Morris community. For example, in the parent study, when asked, "What is the most difficult thing to do in Morris?" most respondents said, "communicating in English" (Manolis et al., 2014, p. 34). Teachers, too, were concerned about the linguistic divide, with 57% expressing concern regarding the limited availability of translation and interpretation services at the school (Manolis et al., 2014, p. 29).

MIEI Research Phase II: Implementing Goals Identified Through the Assessment

Over the last 9 years, the Benson Center has worked with faculty fellows, partners, and students to enact Phase II of the initiative: realizing the 10 goals identified in the report, *Morris Intercultural Education Initiative: A community needs and assets assessment* (Manolis et al., 2014). While researchers aimed to address academic disparities, particularly related to literacy, the goals that emerged suggested a more holistic orientation toward equity at school and in the Morris community.

Short-Term Goals:

- Conduct a visual survey and update the school environment so that it reflects the cultural diversity of the student body and the surrounding community.
- Engage in relationship building with intention.
- Create a Latino Parent Advisory Board.
- Build a volunteer network among Latinx parents.

- Create a network of trained community interpreter-translators and a system for requesting these services.

Long-Term Goals:

- Hire a cultural liaison for Latinx families.
- Implement regular diversity training for all school personnel.
- Advance an institutional commitment to providing accurate translations of all school communications.
- Improve visibility and communication among local service providers.
- Support a Latinx youth group.

Researchers had anticipated that an emphasis on identifying the needs of a given community may unwittingly draw upon deficit thinking and reify oppressive frameworks. In one instance, students and parents were invited to “draw your ideal school.” Almost without exception, Latinx participants included a soccer field in their drawing. Researchers promptly connected Latinx community members who were playing soccer to Morris Area Community Education so they could reserve facilities. As the Latinx community has grown, so have the soccer teams! Today, there are annual indoor and outdoor soccer tournaments complete with team jerseys and trophies. Dreams of play proved wonderfully disruptive to well-intended plans to address equity matters through more concerted attention to literacy issues and academic outcomes.

Programs Comprising the MIEI

Various community stakeholders had been working for several years to improve community integration and laid the foundation for what is today the MIEI:

Morris Area Community Education had established a bilingual preschool and was providing English classes for adults. UMN Morris had been providing ESL classes to adults and coordinating weekly, bilingual discussion groups through the Jane Addams program. A Latina Support and Friendship Group had formed to provide peer support to Latinas in the community. College student volunteers were caring for children during these classes and meetings. Lazos, a community organization aimed at bridging the broader Morris community and the local Latinx population, had formed and begun advocating for a

more inclusive community and school. (Manolis et al., 2014, p. 5)

The following programs were eventually incorporated under the umbrella of MIEI.

Community ESL. Through conversation with Latinx immigrants whom they befriended at a local bar in fall 2011, two undergraduate Spanish majors became aware of the limited resources available to English learners in the Morris community and volunteered to offer informal ESL classes to a small number of adults. The Benson Center has since worked with Minnesota Literacy to provide training for students and community members who wish to teach English (*Minnesota Literacy*, n.d.). The Benson Center pays student interns, coordinates volunteers, and provides ongoing monthly training. Mentored and coordinated by coauthor Roberts, student interns create lessons for Spanish-speaking adult learners using the *Ventures Curriculum*. Since 2013, an average of 23 trained teachers have taught an average of 82 learners per session (fall, spring, and summer) at five levels of proficiency. Participation in Community ESL is free, and people attend as their schedules permit.

The Jane Addams Project. Developed in 2011 by three undergraduates and coauthor Roberts as a place to build intercultural experiences and relationships, the Jane Addams Project functions as MIEI’s signature program for people-to-people exchanges. Inspired by a similar program at Augsburg College, the Jane Addams Project offers an informal social space where participants can practice their bilingual and intercultural skills in realistic conversational contexts to foster relationships and understanding among diverse groups of people. The Jane Addams Project’s guiding principle, “Everybody is a teacher, everybody is a learner,” reflects cultural humility and an insistence on egalitarian dialogue, thus supporting the MIEI ethos. The program is led by three student interns and serves approximately 50 people a year (Vogel, 2012).

ESL for Teaching Reading and Empowering Children. Launched in 2013, ESL TREC (Teaching Reading and Empowering Children) is geared toward meeting literacy needs of second-language learners. Held during adult ESL classes, TREC provides a literacy-rich, bilingual learning environment with age-appropriate lessons, tutoring, and homework help. In a typical session, six to nine tutors provide instruction to 10–20 students. With 12 hours of initial orientation and ongoing monthly training, tutors coordinate the

enrollment process, create lesson plans, and assess student learning.

Tercero Workshop Series. The Tercero program, delivered annually, cooperates with representatives from Morris Area Schools to facilitate language access and support ongoing communication between Spanish-speaking parents and their children's teachers. The workshop provides 7.5 hours of training and two optional practice sessions each year. Since the program's launch in 2015, facilitators have trained approximately 150 bilingual college students and community members to provide community-interpretation services at parent-teacher conferences (see Genova & Berberi, 2022).

Community Needs and Assets Assessment: Things to Consider

Language Access and Freirean Dialogue

In the needs and assets report, both school personnel and Spanish-dominant members of the Morris community identified language access as a critical unmet need. The area's public school administration recognized its legal obligation to provide access to essential information in families' home languages per Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 but was unsure how to meet this obligation consistently (Office for Civil Rights, 2024).⁵ Communication was largely understood as a technical and tactical affordance to supply information deemed essential by the school. School personnel had been taking an ad hoc approach to providing language access, relying on the part-time, situational availability of two bilingual teachers to provide interpretation and translation when asked. This constraint alone is likely to have deterred parents who did not wish to burden the school with a request. Freire's formulation elucidates the unintentional asymmetry inherent in a "communication upon request" system and reveals a tactical impasse. On the one hand, the school was naming without consultation the sphere of information that it considered essential. On the other hand, Latinx families with an emerging understanding of U.S. and local school culture were left to wonder what information they could be requesting about their children's experiences at school.

Once the need for community translation and interpretation was identified as part of the MIEI

community needs and assets assessment, coauthors Genova and Berberi were enlisted to develop a training program for local interpreters. For the first several years, community interpreters volunteered their time. The training was poorly understood by the larger community, and interpretation skills remained undervalued and unremunerated. As a result, many community members logged countless volunteer hours at the school and the community medical center. Teachers were similarly unrecognized for their efforts to support language access for students' families.

Effective Feedback Loops

MIEI has developed several devices for self-evaluation considering the constraints that community members face. One important mechanism is a phone number and email address through which community members can request interpretation services. Although mundane, the direct, local availability of a bilingual means of communication via phone or email represents an important reversal of the norms of language access. Otherwise, such support would have to be requested through the service provider, in English, which could replicate existing social asymmetries between parties.

MIEI also consistently solicits participant feedback through periodic evaluations distributed via email. In response to this feedback, Community ESL classes have evolved: An advanced conversation level was developed, a class was added on Fridays, and classes are now available in the summer months. The feedback that best captures the impact of MIEI efforts pertains to participant experiences beyond the programs, in the Morris community. The participant survey administered at the end of each ESL session asks two questions:

1. "Did Community ESL classes help you to better participate at work? If so, how?" and
2. "Did Community ESL classes help you better participate in the community? If so, how?"

At least 85% of respondents have answered "yes" for each session since 2014. Respondents have noted an easier time talking to their managers and coworkers and a better understanding of workplace safety information. They have noted an easier time talking with their children's teachers and with medical providers. About work, one respondent

⁵ Morris is located 90 miles from the nearest interpretation services company, so language access is often provided via remote technology. Though common in geographically isolated rural communities, this option is more costly and less effective than in-person interpreting.

wrote, “Every day at my job I need to give a report, and in these last few weeks I have been more fluent.” Another respondent referred to Jane Addams as “My place! Where I can share and learn culture!” An ESL participant highlighted hospitality: “Thank you for taking the time to make us feel as though we are in our own country.” In their evaluations of school conferences, teachers have expressed appreciation for the mutual understanding and relationship building that have emerged because of improved communication through interpretation.

Collective Problem Solving

True to our Freirean principles, MIEI is administered in a reflective, dialogic, and responsive way thanks to a steering group hosted by the Benson Center, which includes the Benson Center director, the school’s cultural liaison, *Conexiones*’ executive director, and facilitators for MIEI and the Latina Women’s Friendship Group. Community membership largely depends on who has the time and capacity to attend regular meetings. We meet monthly throughout the academic year to discuss how existing programs are going and to address emerging issues together. There is much taking place in Morris, and we always find a lot to talk about! At our most recent meeting, we realized that a tendency to carpool to ESL classes can undermine attendance, so we discussed after-hours public transportation options. We likewise strategized ways to improve access to mental health and well-being resources, especially for uninsured community members, and sources to fund crafting supplies for the Latina Women’s Friendship Group.

Interpretation at high school conferences has for years been a focus of collective problem-solving. The fact that high school students have several teachers, rather than just one, makes it difficult to schedule interpreters. High school conferences occur on a voluntary, drop-in basis, with teachers sitting at tables in the gymnasium. Originally, two interpreters were “on call” for requests at the high school. This plan proved unworkable in 2018, when one of them was suddenly unable to participate. The remaining volunteer on call interpreted for over 30 conferences in a single evening, an exhausting regimen. Each year, in conjunction with the MIEI steering group, the cultural liaison devises new ways to respond to this need. High school parents in need of interpreting services now sign up in advance to meet with all their children’s teachers at the same time. While an improvement, this situation is not ideal, either, since English-

speaking parents (who are not required to schedule appointments) often must wait while an interpreted conference is taking place. In the last 3 years, at least six teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with this arrangement, and three have stated that they were unable to leave their tables to attend the scheduled conferences with interpreters. As a result of this feedback, we are once again reconsidering the system for next year.

Increased Teacher Engagement

In 2017, the school was able to hire its first cultural liaison for Latinx families. A university alum who simultaneously took up the role of executive director at *Conexiones*, the cultural liaison was able to leverage her experiences as a Fulbright scholar in Mexico as well as warm relationships with Latinx community members and university faculty and staff to advocate for important advances. As the number of requests for interpretation continued to grow, the cultural liaison was able to advocate for adjusting teacher contracts to take into consideration the longer length of time required for consecutive interpretation; conferences now are held over two days, rather than one. Teachers appreciate this measure, and in 2022, one-third of those surveyed explicitly mentioned the change as a factor contributing to the success of parent-teacher conferences.

The cultural liaison proved decisive in procuring recognition and remuneration for the labor that interlingual communication involves for both teachers and interpreters. Morris Area Schools began encouraging teachers to attend training about working with an interpreter in 2017. Those who do are now paid and awarded continuing-education credits. Trained interpreters who have long volunteered to use their skills are paid a reasonable hourly rate. These changes, clustered in the last 5 years of MIEI activity, gave rise to the conditions that made it possible for trained interpreters to cover 122 parent-teacher conferences over two workdays in the fall of 2022.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, advances in equity improve engagement. Two-thirds of interpretation requests involve communicating with elementary teachers, but as the children grow up, interpretation requests increase at the high school. In 2022, the high school ELL teacher enlisted our help with a training geared toward her colleagues. We surmise that this teacher’s engagement was prompted by greater equity in her own circumstances. The structural changes discussed above made legible the extra time and work that interpretation entails

for all involved. In spring 2022, for the first time, a graduating Latinx high school senior received an award for their bilingual and intercultural brokering skills. Both advances highlight a deepening understanding in our community of the value of bilingual and intercultural skills.

Perennial Challenges

MIEI progress has been nonlinear and intermittent in part because of staff turnover among participating entities. Several Latinx faculty and staff have left the university over the past decade, student interns inevitably graduate and leave Morris each spring, and VISTA interns are not always enticed to move to our rural location for the stipend or contract parameters stipulated by the program. As a result, MIEI has not been able to hire a bilingual VISTA intern for several years.

The dearth of local individuals with adequate language skills to coordinate programs, along with dramatic growth in the Latinx community over the past decade, taxes the capacity of bilingual community members. MIEI relies upon individuals who often have full-time employment, child and elder care responsibilities, and a variety of community commitments. Engaging bilingual community members in ways that do not create a disparate burden is an ongoing challenge. An individual's visa status often prohibits them from working for money. Although many Latinx community members volunteer in the school and in the community, any expectation that they *should* contribute without remuneration undermines the equity inherent in Freirean engagement.

Lessons Learned

A Hiatus May Signal Autonomy

Latinx community members approached a Latina community member with professional training in counseling to lead a Latina support group. The resulting Latina Support and Friendship Group provides a space wherein Latina mothers can get to know one another and learn about resources available in the community. While the group is not formally administered by the Benson Center, early on, the university supported the group's meetings by providing childcare and recruiting volunteer presenters on subjects like mental health, child development, home winterizing (a crucial skill for migrants to Minnesota!), and gardening. When its founding organizer stepped back, the group struggled to continue. While the demand for community and mutual support among the original group of participants lessened as they

created their own social circles, the need for such a group continues as new community members come to live in the Morris area.

After pausing for a year or so to regroup amid the upheaval of COVID-19, the group has reconvened with mostly new participants, new leadership, and continued support from the Benson Center. If the MIEI steering group were invested in top-down organizational control, members might have intervened to sustain it. Instead, we trusted their process, understanding the organic evolution of the group as the consequence of increased agency and new community connections. Ironically, the fact that the group did not need MIEI's assistance suggests that MIEI's efforts are working.

Draw Upon Local Knowledge and Relationships

Refashioned every year in response to participant feedback, the community interpretation workshop series is tailored to our community. We have developed our own training manual that is fully bilingual in Spanish and English. The intent is less related to language access (since one needs advanced linguistic skills to interpret) than to a desire to infuse MIEI programs with equity. All parties involved in the interpreting enterprise—parents, teachers, and interpreters alike—receive a concise handout of protocols to follow in support of effective communication through an interpreter; the handout for parents is in Spanish.

Community members have noted with dismay a bias toward urban contexts and themes in the training materials that are widely available. Their assessment of the shortcomings of established curricula prompted facilitators to localize aspects of the workshop series, which focuses explicitly on community interpreting in the local school context. The first session features a local panel about interculturalism in the Morris community, the last meeting involves relationship building with the teachers with whom interpreters will be working, and each day includes lunch, a gesture of hospitality that serves to build camaraderie. This relationship building may seem to challenge key protocols of community interpreting. In our small town, people enjoy multiple, intersecting roles and have personal relationships in addition to their professional responsibilities, realities that render conventional professional boundaries impracticable. If someone declines an interpreter due to a conflict of interest, it is often exceedingly difficult to find another. Rather than prohibit trainees from interpreting for neighbors and coworkers, as might be appropriate in a large

metropolitan area, facilitators have found it more effective to teach program participants to navigate potential conflicts of interest with sensitivity.

While we attempt to maximize efficiency, we are also trying to build a corps of fully trained community interpreters in our region. When a workshop participant has expressed an interest in continuing their training, the Benson Center has been able to fund their participation in a 40-hour community interpreter training program, whether via a remote option that emerged during the pandemic or in person in the Minneapolis/Saint Paul metro area.

It Takes Time to Negotiate the Gap Between Learning and Doing

Genova and Berberi were puzzled when, in a credit-based version of the community interpreting course, students could not understand their roles as facilitators rather than mediators. Armed with liberal arts experiences, our “woke warriors” were horrified at the idea that they should allow the other participants in an interpreting triad to work out cultural misunderstandings themselves. (Had they not majored in Spanish precisely to learn about Hispanic cultures?) They were likewise surprised to learn that the community interpreter code of ethics compelled them to interpret racist comments with accuracy but to resist further intervention (see Bancroft et al., 2015, Chapter 3). Alas, knowing when to bite one’s tongue is not one of our Campus Student Learning Outcomes; rather, liberal arts education favors a decidedly non-Freirean, talk-heavy model of active participation. We devoted a significant amount of class time to discussing students’ conflicting feelings about what Bancroft et al. (2015) call “communicative autonomy” (p. 75), a professional protocol requiring their utmost discretion. The students finally understood the idea of nonintervention, though not all of them agreed with it.

A second reason for what we understood to be deep-seated resistance may be a dawning awareness of/in the Freirean world that emerges between equals who are participating in dialogic relation, and the responsibility and responsiveness that world necessarily entails. We have learned to trust the cultural liaison’s assessment of an interpreter’s language skills as well as maturity. Indeed, as the following examples will illustrate, the more agency the cultural liaison has in vetting interpreters and organizing conferences, the better things go.

Leave The Ivory Tower Behind

Ironically, a major barrier to improved intercultural agility has been the professors themselves. We admit that we often found the Freirean model of egalitarian relations with community partners to be challenging. Freirean dialogue required us to recognize and problematize our own educational, ethnic, and economic privileges and to question our assumptions and pretense of expertise (Freire, 1970/2005; Nagar & Geiger, 2007; Tuck, 2009). Our structural roles as educators proved particularly problematic for the community interpretation program.

As professors, our instinct is to support our students. We would do this—unwittingly—even when their interests conflicted with those of our community partners. Viewing community engagement in terms of intellectual development, we felt comfortable encouraging students to participate when their communication skills and professional demeanor were still emerging. “This is how they learn,” we thought. While true, our instinct did not always serve the needs of the school or families well—a point that four teachers made on their anonymous feedback surveys during 2018 and 2019.

On parent-teacher conference day(s), we facilitator-teachers used to sit at a check-in table to offer support to trainees between conferences. We had not noticed that, while we trained both students and community members, only university students were availing themselves of our support, reinforcing the very divides that MIEI seeks to overcome. The cultural liaison popped our “university bubble” by enlisting the help of familiar, bilingual personnel at the school to greet Spanish-speaking parents. The project became much more vibrant when we stopped being teachers and started being community members. Somewhat embarrassingly, we had not learned the local community’s “language” well enough to read the writing on the wall. The cultural liaison’s intervention marked a transfer of “ownership” from “gown” to “town” and entailed a rearrangement of space and person-power.

MIEI Phase III: The Rural Intercultural Education Initiative

In the spring of 2024, the Benson Center was awarded an additional grant from the Otto Bremer Trust. Its support will make possible an additional—and hopefully bilingual—staff position for the Benson Center and the development of

new initiatives organized via the (renamed) Rural Intercultural Education Initiative (RIEI). RIEI represents an expansion of community integration efforts to other communities in the region. To date, eight communities have requested the support of the Benson Center to shepherd the sort of cultural changes that have taken place in Morris. The new funding will enable the intercultural education initiative team to conduct localized research with diverse community leaders and codevelop responsive programming in each community.

Language access is also a self-reported need in these communities. In response, two authors have begun developing the Rural Community Interpreting workshop. This 6-week hybrid course entails instruction via prerecorded video and 1 to 2 hours of live interaction via Zoom per week. Although facilitators are accustomed to adapting the training based on participant feedback, this new modality and the variety of communities it will serve entail several constant variables—variables that, although predictable, facilitators are unlikely to resolve once and for all. Hybrid cohorts are likely to be more diverse in terms of linguistic, cultural, and educational background. They also are likely to bring different attitudes about education in general as well as a variety of schedule constraints and personal dispositions toward independent learning opportunities like this one. Will participants have access to requisite technology, adequate broadband access, and childcare, to say nothing of local advocates who are equipped to respond to barriers they may face in completing the course? Can their efforts be sustained without a foundational coordinating hub such as the Benson Center?

Conclusion

Much like MIEI itself, codrafting this article has required humility, patience, and grace. A nuanced understanding of community dynamics and the complexities of our relationships have informed our writing. The multiplicity and “messiness” of collaboration is difficult to narrate as a conventional research project, which requires a linearity that runs contrary to the spirit of our dialogical and iterative process.

Narrating that dynamic process is exactly the contribution that we hope to make. As MIEI prepares to expand to nearby communities in West Central Minnesota, we hope that small towns like Morris will find inspiration in our efforts to build community—in the benefits these efforts continue

to reap locally and in the places that MIEI alums now call home. The retrospective process of writing about our efforts has enabled us to realize the foundational assets that fuel the dynamism in our community:

- Cultural humility and honesty among all members of the steering group: a willingness to disagree and to compromise
- Trusted social connections to people in the group(s) with which you are trying to strengthen community connections and improve equity
- Access to bilingual people and resources
- Strong and adaptable leadership with a keen sense of what is already present, what is needed, what is wanted, and what is possible in your community
- The types of resources that the university has been able to provide MIEI, such as research expertise and capacity, infrastructural support, access to funding for additional professional development, a revolving source of learners and person-power, etc.
- Respect for wisdom and perspectives gained through lived experience
- Time, patience, persistence, and a capacity to appreciate—and usefully measure—dynamic change

Freirean praxis favors horizontal, dialogic exchange over the top-down approach. It is only through the humanizing process of shared understanding that we have been able to join in reflexive action toward overcoming structural barriers to the achievement of full democratic citizenship. In Morris, egalitarian conversation among stakeholders led to the establishment of community programs focused on intercultural and interlinguistic understanding. Freirean praxis has enabled us to grow in our understanding of each other and of the systems in which we are all embedded. Our cooperative, conscious engagement has developed the critical skills available to all of us to understand our roles, connectedness, and agency in the world we are forging together. Emerging ways of orienting ourselves within these systems locally may point the way to broader systems transformation.

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