HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
A RETROSPECTIVE
The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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In 2008, David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Marguerite S. Shaffer about her work as director of American studies and associate professor of American studies and history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

**Brown:** Your current work focuses on public culture in the United States. And so . . .

**Shaffer:** For the past five years I have been seeking ways to integrate my scholarly and teaching interests with larger questions and concerns about the role of higher education, specifically the role of American studies, in preparing students to become engaged citizens and public leaders. I began my tenure as director of American studies at Miami by applying for an NEH Humanities Focus Grant to reassess and revise the curriculum in American studies. Not only was the existing curriculum outdated, but it seemed a little irrelevant to the current needs and concerns of Miami students. I felt the program would benefit from a closer examination of the core intellectual ideas and learning objectives of the field. Specifically, I wanted to really think about what American studies could offer to students and faculty confronting the concerns of our current culture.

In 2002-2003, the Miami American Studies Program was one of twenty-five humanities departments nationwide to be awarded one of these grants. The dialogue this grant supported helped to spearhead a larger discussion about public culture as a central theme in American studies. It spun off into an academic symposium on the transformation of public culture, which resulted in my edited volume of *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States* to be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in June 2008, as well as a prototype, multiyear curricular initiative, “Acting Locally: Civic Learning and Leadership in Southwest Ohio,” which was funded by the Harry T. Wilks Leadership Institute at Miami.

To be perfectly honest, though, I must confess that my turn to public culture stems from a more personal uncertainty about my efficacy and worth as an American studies scholar.

**Brown:** Please go on.

**Shaffer:** I have joked with colleagues that I am in the midst of an academic midlife crisis—questioning every aspect of life in academe. In thinking about my future in the university, I have wondered whether my time...
will be well spent researching and writing a scholarly monograph that might well get me promoted, but that will be read by only a handful of like-minded scholars with similar intellectual interests. I have questioned the time I devote to teaching critical-thinking skills to students who are socialized, both inside and outside the university, to care more about their final grades and potential career options than the knowledge they can share and the collective future they will create. As a parent of two young children, I look out to the world and worry about what their futures will be as President Bush and his administration systematically undermine all the American—not just American, the humane—values I hold dear, like “you don’t lie,” “you don’t attack people unprovoked,” “you don’t torture people”—basic stuff. I wonder if my work in the academy is paving the way for a culture I want my children to inherit. On very bad days, I think not. So, I think about public culture as a way to alleviate these uncertainties.

Brown: In your introduction to *Public Culture* you speak of your struggle “to promote both cultural competency and cultural agency” as an American studies scholar. Is this part of your “questioning every aspect of life in academe,” including your own field?

Shaffer: Most definitely, yes. For the past 20 to 30 years, cultural studies theory has been the driving force in American studies scholarship. Although postmodern theory emerged as part of a politically charged intellectual commitment to egalitarian social change, it has evolved into a kind of cultural or identity politics focusing on the “Other” and interrogating subaltern subjectivity. Much good has come from this work in terms of redressing racism and sexism and empowering marginalized groups to value their distinct cultures. However, the primary focus of this theoretical perspective has elevated “difference” over every other cultural category. In exploring American culture, American studies as a field trains students to examine and dissect issues of social difference—race, class, gender, ethnicity—and to understand theories of hegemony and ideology. In other words, students are taught to deconstruct American culture—they can closely read and parse all sorts of cultural texts, they can critique power structures, and unravel ideological stances and
systems—but they are given few tools or opportunities to move beyond critique to create communities or support or even imagine cultural belonging.

For the past four years, I have team-taught an introductory course in American studies with my colleague, Mary Kupiec Cayton. Semester after semester, we have found that students have made incredible strides in terms of being able to read, write, understand, and critique American culture. But we have also found that at the end of each semester, students leave the course with little hope about the possibilities for changing or impacting American culture—*their* culture. They have little sense of themselves as shapers of culture. They have little sense of their connection to American culture. It’s almost as if they feel like victims or prisoners of American culture. They see themselves as outside of or beyond the culture they have been studying, like it is not about them. They gain critical thinking skills, but they don’t see themselves as active members of their own culture. They don’t see themselves as cultural agents.

I think the university reinforces this. The liberal arts curriculum, at least at Miami, is still broadly conceptualized in the traditional enlightenment context of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. But as the culture has become increasingly privatized, knowledge is reduced to a credential in the market place rather than a foundation for engaged citizenship and public leadership. So students come to the university so that they can get what they need to find a good job. They understand knowledge and critical thinking skills as bargaining chips in the free market. I struggle to get them to see knowledge as a form of power that can allow them to shape the world in which they will live, in which they *do live*. I struggle to get them to see the connections between knowledge and action. So I guess to answer your question, I see a real tension between theory and practice in American studies. Postmodern theory has reached a point where it has almost negated the possibility of conscious, meaningful individual action. Yet more than ever, our communities need active participants rather than passive victims or detached critics. So the struggle for me has been how to use the critical perspective of cultural theory to promote, rather than undermine, cultural agency.

**Brown:** Obviously, you take some exception to a prevailing emphasis in American studies on the issues of “difference and identity,” with insufficient
attention paid to “belonging, collective life, and community.” What encourages you that a shift toward “a shared public culture,” as you have put it, is gaining ground in your field?

**Shaffer:** First, let me say that I think that much of the scholarship in American studies focusing on diversity and difference has been extremely important and necessary work. My concept of the public very much depends on the vision of a multicultural society moved forward by this scholarship. However, I believe it is important not to completely abandon the idea of shared public culture or cultures to the divided concerns of identity politics.

I think, in general, the notion of “a shared public culture” is a little too monolithic and idealistic. And I am definitely not interested in a return to the old Cold War view of American exceptionalism. I think shared public cultures can emerge, but they are temporal and provisional, more “process” than “thing.” It is probably more accurate to say there seems to be a growing interest in the concept of the public.

Probably the most encouraging evidence I can provide is not hard evidence, but rather the response I have had from students and other scholars who are anxious to address public issues. In developing the new major in American studies and providing students with opportunities to engage in communities, I have found that students are transformed when they have the opportunity to put their learning in a larger public context. Similarly, faculty feel like they are using their scholarly expertise to engage real-world issues.

But if you need hard evidence, perhaps the most telling is the thematic focus for the next annual American Studies Convention. The title for the conference is “Back Down to the Crossroads: Integrative American Studies in Theory and Practice.” The call for papers requests proposals that address how American studies scholars can and have integrated their roles as scholars, educators, and citizens.

Probably the most developed and institutionalized example of this kind of scholarly work in American studies is the Imagining America Project, which is a national consortium of colleges and universities that promotes public scholarship in the arts and humanities. But there are other examples on a smaller scale, such as the American studies program at the University of Wyoming, which specializes in training students to engage in public sector work. The American Studies Association also has a community partnership grant program to facilitate this kind of engaged work. Recently funded projects range from a service-learning project with the New Mexico Office of the State Historian to an exhibition of creative work done by young African American residents in the Arbor Hill neighborhood of Albany, New York.
So from my own personal experience to the larger institutional frameworks of the field, I think there is a growing interest in issues relating to the public.

**Brown:** More importantly, what evidence encourages you that such a shift is gaining ground, not just in American studies but in American life, which you say “increasingly revolves around entertainment, advertising, consumption, spectacle, and image”?

**Shaffer:** This one I’m not sure I can answer. I go back and forth. Some days, when I interact with people who are involved in trying to better their communities, I have real hope. Other days, when I look at our current political situation, I wonder if I am simply delusional. I have no hard evidence either way. But I get some sense of hope watching my students and seeing what has happened with them as they have become more involved in their communities. In my scholarly work on tourism, I have argued that tourists are not simply dupes or passive consumers of commercial advertising and popular media. I believe that because I do not think of myself as a victim of global consumer capitalism. I am trying to push back. I think—I hope—others are trying to push back as well.

**Brown:** As you may know, the Kettering Foundation has a long-standing concern that the professional mindset prevailing in higher education too often ignores the “common goods” that only democratic self-rule can provide. Can such a mindset sometimes produce divisions among your colleagues in American studies?

**Shaffer:** I would not say that the “professional mindset” necessarily produces divisions among my colleagues, but I do think that the way in which the university has institutionalized professional standards most definitely works against a broader notion of shared democratic knowledge production and dissemination, and the way it might be defined in American studies. The bureaucratic process of tenure and promotion, and the narrow compartmentalization of teaching, scholarship, and service, works against the very interdisciplinary and engaged work that can be done in American studies. Perhaps there might be conflict among my colleagues if the university criteria for tenure and promotion defined teaching, scholarship, and service in a more integrated and holistic way. Then I could potentially see those advocating traditional scholarship and teaching questioning faculty members
interested in pushing the boundaries of the scholarship of engagement. But the university has basically cast “the professional mindset” in stone and, although it might encourage innovative community-based, engaged, or public work, professional guidelines for tenure and promotion relegate that kind of work to service, which counts third, way behind scholarship and teaching, in terms of tenure and promotion. What that means for American studies faculty is that, first and foremost, you need a scholarly monograph and good teaching that fits into a standardized three-credit-hour framework; then you can do creative public work above and beyond all that. For a junior faculty member, I just don’t see that as feasible. In fact, for myself, I know that time spent on public work is time taken from the scholarly work I need to complete to get promoted. The university guidelines are clear. So the issue of conflict is moot.

**Brown:** So the “professional mindset” rules. What a dreary prospect. Let me move on to more positive ground. You speak of “public culture” not as “an end in and of itself,” but rather “an ongoing process.” Could you elaborate on what such a process consists of?

**Shaffer:** I think there is a desire to see the public or publics as a thing or an entity—an ideal of a participatory democratic society completely conscious of its shared endeavor to create and maintain some sort of shared identity and common goals. But I prefer the concept of the public in contrast to the concept of national identity or national character—concepts that used to be central to the American studies endeavor—as a public less fixed and monolithic, more fluid and adaptable, more provisional and temporal. Publics shift and change; they respond to specific issues and events; they are diverse and divided.

My conceptualization of the public is derived from Hannah Arendt and John Dewey in the context of my training in American studies. In particular, I think Arendt’s image of the public realm as a table around which diverse individuals come together to discuss and debate, to arrive at some sort of common understanding, best embodies how I have come to imagine who constitutes the public or publics. It suggests that every individual is a potential member of a public, and he or she becomes so when he or she begins to engage with other individuals to create shared meaning—even if only temporarily. What Dewey adds to this is the idea that although liberalism (and here I am
referring to the political philosophy of liberalism) has conditioned us to believe that society all boils down to the individual, in actuality, the individual is completely dependent on and connected to others. My readings of Arendt and Dewey are filtered through concepts of culture that are central to American studies; specifically, the idea that culture is the shared signs, symbols, codes, messages, and contexts that give our individual experience meaning. Clifford Geertz has this wonderful image of culture as a kind of spider web. He says that culture is the web of significance in which we are suspended. For me Geertz’s web is very similar to Arendt’s table.

So, when I say that I see the public as a process, I see it as the process of creating, negotiating, debating, and contesting shared meaning. It is culture-making. It is the act of coming together, or meeting around the table, that brings publics into being. So, I guess I would have to say that when I am talking about publics, I am ultimately talking about the process of public discourse—individuals coming together to discuss, debate, resolve, challenge an issue, address an event, or respond to a problem.

Brown: Why, then, do students not see themselves as potential participants in culture-making?

Shaffer: The key words here are “potential participants.” For the past thirty years, basically since the election of Ronald Reagan, our culture has become increasingly privatized. The private sphere and the free market have come to dominate civil society or as William Galston has put it, the market has become the “organizing metaphor” for everyday experience. In the process, the concept of the public has become anemic and withered. College students simply reflect the values of our present-day culture. They have been socialized at every turn to understand and think of themselves and their role in society in privatized and individualized terms. They have been conditioned and encouraged to think of culture-making as self-fashioning, self-fulfillment, and self-improvement. They don’t see themselves as participants in a public process. They don’t really imagine themselves as part of a public; rather they are Facebook friends, fans, members of a market segment, part of an identity group. The university encourages this by treating students like customers and presenting knowledge and learning as a product. So students are given few, if any, opportunities to imagine and experience themselves in public terms.

Brown: Let’s turn to your “Acting Locally” project in southwestern Ohio. It “explores the intersections between globalization and local transformation.” One of the three communities that are the focus of the project is the Over-the-Rhine
neighborhood in Cincinnati. Could you say more about how “globalization” impacts such a community?

**Shaffer:** At the turn of the 19th century, Over-the-Rhine (OTR) was home to over 40,000 residents who lived and worked in the city. It was one of the most densely populated and diverse neighborhoods in the Midwest. It supported a diversified manufacturing economy in the metropolitan area that produced machine tools, paper, shoes, and soap, among other products. The neighborhood and the city were vitally linked to an interconnected local, regional, and national economy. Globalization has transformed the social and economic landscape of southwestern Ohio in the past half century. The diversified manufacturing economy of the 19th century and early 20th century has all but disappeared. Although Cincinnati is still home base to a number of multinational corporations, the local and regional economy is suffering.

Downtown Cincinnati has sought to rehabilitate its economic base through tourism with the construction of two new stadiums, the renovation of the convention center, and the creation of the Underground Railroad Freedom Center. And although tourism can attract visitors and provide some revenue, it creates predominantly low-paying service sector jobs, caters to outsiders, and effectively transforms metropolitan residents into visitors, audience, and spectators. The present status of OTR reflects some of the deficiencies of this tourist-based solution. The neighborhood is currently home to approximately 7,500 residents, almost 75% of whom are African Americans living below the poverty line. The neighborhood has been plagued by drug trafficking, violent crime, and widespread poverty. There are approximately 106 social service agencies serving OTR, and there are approximately 500 abandoned buildings. As the largest residential neighborhood directly adjacent to the downtown core, Over-the-Rhine is vital to the health of downtown Cincinnati.

**Brown:** In constructing such a project it seems to me there is a “hegemonic” assumption, as you might put it, that globalization undermines or overwhelms local cultures. Since you have been critical of postmodern theory “which effectively denies the possibilities of public culture,” is your project aimed at challenging such an assumption and countering such theory?

**Shaffer:** Last summer, Nan Kari from the Jane Addams School for Democracy said to me that theory presents a mindset and a way of thinking that is almost antithetical to public action and engagement. We were talking about a student who had been interning at the Jane Addams School, and who had then gone on to write a senior thesis about her experience drawing on postmodern feminist theory. I had talked to the student while visiting the
Jane Addams School, and it struck me that she was struggling to reconcile her transformative experience at Jane Addams with her critical assessment of the Jane Addams School. I can relate to that. When I look at the world through the lens of theory, I see no way out. From this perspective, globalization is, in many ways, hegemonic; but within this theoretical construct, you could also say that there are counterhegemonic forces working to challenge and transform the global power structure.

So, I guess I would have to say “yes and no” in answer to your question. Yes, in some ways, I think one of the implicit goals of the Acting Locally project is to empower local communities—to get students to understand that they can partner with community members to be agents of change; to promote and support participatory democratic action; to connect knowledge and power. Within the theoretical construct, this might be seen as counterhegemonic.

But, I also have to say no, because, like Terry Eagleton, I believe it is time for academics to move beyond theory to begin to imagine new ways of creating and using knowledge. So in many ways I see this project as more of a prototype for integrative learning that asks students and faculty to use knowledge and critical thinking not simply to judge and critique, but as a foundation on which to act in the world and to imagine, as Terry Eagleton says, new forms of belonging.

Brown: Part of the strategy for the project is “to identify and study key components of existing sustainable communities in the region.” What “key components” have you found thus far? And assuming you have, what “mechanisms” are being developed that will help to maintain and expand such communities?

Shaffer: Having begun to engage with these communities, “key components” now sounds a little abstract and detached from the life and soul of the communities; it reads like academic-speak. What we have found is that there is a range of people, from individual activists to those working for social service organizations, to others working in nonprofit organizations, who have done incredible work in seeking to better their communities. Whether it be Lourdes Leon, owner of Taqueria Mercado, who has opened her bakery to students involved in a language exchange program, or the sisters at Venice-on-Vine who have worked with students to help create a job internship program, or the members of the MOON co-op who are partnering with students to help support a local food economy in Oxford, there are all sorts of people out there seeking to support and sustain their communities.

As the project has evolved, what we have found is that we can support these
individuals and organizations by facilitating conversations, making connections, doing some of the background legwork, and providing support for ongoing projects. So I guess if I had to name a mechanism to maintain and support such communities, it would be the partnership mechanism, which I liken to building Hannah Arendt’s table—defining a third space that exists beyond the university, that incorporates and draws upon the assets of everyday community, providing opportunities for a range of diverse individuals to connect, talk, and imagine solutions. The partnership allows people to come together and brainstorm, and figure out ways to implement solutions, reframe issues, and make connections.

**Brown:** What are some other specifics that will help me understand the partnership mechanism as it developed between your students, faculty colleagues, and community members?

**Shaffer:** Although, from the start, we wanted to work together with community members to address community issues, I think it took a while for us to sort that out. The academic model is grounded on scholar experts collecting and examining the data and then solving the problem. It was hard to imagine beyond that model when we first started. But now, as the project has moved forward, it is centered on partnerships, and the individuals and organizations in the three communities are key to those partnerships.

In Hamilton, we began by building on the relationships Professor Shelly Bromberg had developed with the Latino community. Shelly introduced students to Lourdes Leon, owner of Taqueria Mercado. Leon connected students with some of her Latino employees who were interested in working on their English. Leon offered the use of her bakery kitchen and invited the students to come one afternoon a week to help teach English. Students have developed what they call a language exchange, where individual students partner with an employee and meet once a week at the designated time to practice English and Spanish. With the help of a new community partner, Pastor Josh Colon, the language exchange has now expanded to two additional sites: Princeton Pike Church and a local nonprofit in Hamilton.

In rural Butler county, students are partnering with the Miami Oxford Organic Network (MOON) Co-op and the Miami Oxford Organic Network chapter of the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) to help support and build a local-food economy in the region. They are interviewing farmers and local restaurants to create a local-food guide. They have organized a local-food dinner to raise awareness about local-food options, and they helped organize and administer the Fall Harvest MOON Festival.
In OTR, students are partnering with a range of organizations. One student is working with Over-the-Rhine Community Housing to set up Choices Café to provide a positive and safe environment for community members, tenants, and volunteers to meet and build community. Another student is partnering with the Over-the-Rhine Community Housing Network and the Peaslee Neighborhood Center to redesign the entryway and lobby of the Peaslee Center. A third student has partnered with the Cincinnati Civic Garden Center and is working on designing and building an irrigation system for the Eco-Garden on Main St. Two other students are working with the manager of Venice-on-Vine, Regina Saperstein, to design a tax-incentive plan for local businesses that will encourage them to hire workers who have completed the Power Inspires Progress (PIP) training program at Venice-on-Vine.

With all of these projects, the community members have been the driving force. Community partners articulate the goals and students have worked with them to develop and implement projects that will forward those community goals.

Brown: Thus far in the “Acting Locally” project, what has surprised you that was not contemplated when the project was originally put together?

Shaffer: So many things. What has become so clear in doing this project is how much it challenges the traditional way things are set up within the university; not only the way knowledge is conceptualized, produced, and disseminated, but also the way faculty think about teaching and the way students think about learning. If I had to choose the top two things, I would say, first, that I had no idea how transformational this kind of experience would be for students. In the past, I have seen students get inspired about ideas, but I don’t think I have ever seen this level of empowerment. During the course of the project, which at this point is about three-quarters of the way through, I have watched strong students evolve into inspirational leaders, and I have seen timid students gain a level of self-confidence and commitment that is immeasurable.

Second, I would have to say that I have been surprised at how constraining the traditional structures of knowledge production at the university are. Community-based work is inherently messy and sometimes
nonlinear and irrational. The three-credit-hour framework, separate disciplines, and traditional models of scholarship don't translate very easily into this real and messy world. Often times, it seemed easier to fall back into the predictability of one-hour class meetings and five-page papers and/or traditional academic research and article writing. Community-based projects take a lot of extra work on the part of faculty, students, and community partners. The only way this project has been possible is through the extreme generosity of the Provost’s office at Miami University, in particular the support and vision of Vice Provost John Skillings, and the funding and support from the Harry T. Wilks Leadership Institute. It would be nice if the institution supported this kind of work more as the norm rather than the exception.

**Brown:** Thank you, Marguerite.

**Shaffer:** Thank you, David, for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts.
An Interview with Lourdes Leon

Brown: Please tell me how you got involved with Professor Shelly Bromberg and the Wilks Scholars project.

Leon: Well, I had several employees who wanted to learn or improve their English, so I asked Shelly if she had any students who might want to exchange English for Spanish lessons. She sent out a request to the Wilks students and then next thing you know, we had a whole group here. Then, in March 2007, another group of students from the Wilks project wanted to help us create a real positive community clean-up program, so I started working with that group as well.

Brown: In getting involved in a language exchange project, what did you expect your employees and the students to get out of it?

Leon: More than anything, to involve the English-speaking community with the Hispanic community to increase cross-cultural communication in this region where the number of Latinos is increasing. This way, everybody learns about other cultures and other languages and we accept each other more easily.

Brown: How do you think the language exchange program could be changed and improved to make it a better model for forming partnerships in your community?

Leon: I think we need to have a more formal registration process. If the students were to come on the weekends to just talk with employees, they could let them know what is going on, they could interact with them, get their phone numbers, and then tell them when the classes are. Then, they could register them and maybe offer a little dictionary or something that makes the process more legitimate. They could say, “here's a little dictionary for you, see you on Tuesday for the beginning of classes.” If you register, you feel like it is something worthwhile and not just an informal meeting.

So, for instance, on a Saturday the students could set up a table here that had a sign and information about the Language Exchange—do it maybe every other week.

We need the students to interact more with the employees rather than just coming one day to do the exchange. This community responds better when they get to know you and feel comfortable.

We might also need to do this more often—maybe two days a week—so that the community partners feel more like it is a class.

Brown: Do you feel like an equal partner with the university? Do you think your employees are getting as much out of the project as they are putting in?

Leon: Yes. Because we respect each other, are open to criticism and trying new things, and really enjoy what we are doing together.

As for my employees, yes, this helps them to try to speak English, even if they are still struggling with pronunciation. A lot of times, they feel
comfortable with students, and then when they go out to, for instance, buy a car or get something for the restaurant, they will come back and tell me, with pride, that they were able to do it in English. I think the exchange gives them confidence.

**Brown:** From your perspective as a Latina business owner and community member, what is the current status of Latino immigrants in Hamilton?

**Leon:** Very bad. Recently, the sheriff announced that he had 287(g) powers. The 287(g) is a subset of immigration enforcement that gives state or local law enforcement certain limited immigration power. In the case of the sheriff, his 287(g) will allow him to fill out immigration paperwork he previously could not. My sons said we should protest that and I asked them, “Why? They are not going to listen to us.” I am so tired of this uncertain future; we don’t know how bad it is going to get, even for businesses. Because Latinos are being targeted, they are moving out and not coming here, and we just don’t know what is going to happen. My business, because it is focused on the Latino community, cannot survive without community.

**Brown:** Could you tell me more about why this is happening? Why this sheriff?

**Leon:** The Latino population in this area is relatively new, growing in maybe the last ten years. So, a lot of people here have never seen a Latino. The sheriff is playing on their fears and ignorance to advance his career.

**Brown:** And so . . .

**Leon:** Well, that’s a whole book because he wants to “clean up” his county of Latinos. We keep asking about how you can identify someone who is undocumented. We know, from who is being picked up for even minor violations, that he is targeting Latinos, and in particular, people from Mexico and Central America, because his idea of Latino does not include Afro Latinos or those from a European background. He thinks all Latinos are drug dealers, child abusers, and criminals. Of course, there are bad people in every community, but there are many more good people. He even has on his web site, from when he went to the Mexico/Texas border, that everyone who crosses from Mexico is a criminal. He needs to learn that there are a lot of good people crossing for good reasons.

**Brown:** Could you tell me something about your growing up in Chicago and its impact on what you have pursued since then?

**Leon:** Triton College offered ESL in different parts of the community where they were located. They were in Melrose Park, a Western suburb of Chicago. They had a Lutheran school that was a regular school, but in the evenings they had an ESL program for the community.

It was amazing to find a university so interested in the non-English speaking community that had developed those programs back in the early 1980s. Here, meanwhile, there are no such partnerships between the
universities and Latino community, at least not to the extent that we had in Chicago. They had their own office right in the center of the Latino community where you could take a placement test and start studying English. It was interesting that the surrounding communities were not very happy about having the Latinos in that area at the time, but they still had the school and the English programs. But maybe, thanks to the college, we got a chance to establish ourselves and our community.

So I am hoping that we can do something like that here with Miami or some other university.

**Brown:** Thank you, Lourdes.
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