Is the academic recession over?
Launches Institute of Mexican Studies

by Jeff Simmons

It was time to celebrate, but before they could, organizers of the event were faced with a predicament that any party or event planner would love to confront: so many people responded swiftly that they needed to identify a larger space.

The launch of City University of New York's (CUNY) Institute of Mexican Studies drew hundreds to CUNY's Graduate Center in midtown Manhattan for a celebratory kickoff on a steamy summer's day. Students, faculty, elected officials, civic and community leaders all gathered to witness the fruits of years of tireless work.

"The CUNY Institute of Mexican Studies. Don't you love the sound of that?" said Senior Vice Chancellor Jay Hershenson, triggering an explosive chorus of cheers and applause. "They say its takes a village and no one person or five people can ever do it alone."

The Institute, the first of its kind on the East Coast, is headquartered at CUNY's Lehman College in the Bronx, a borough that has witnessed a dramatic escalation in the Mexican population. Over the last decade, both New York City and CUNY have seen sizeable growth in Mexicans and Mexican-Americans arriving at their doorstep.

United States Census data have shown that Mexican immigration trends have elevated their numbers so that they are poised to eventually surpass Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in New York City. According to an analysis conducted by the New York City Department of City Planning, the Mexican population ranked fourth among Hispanic groups in the city, following those identifying as Puerto Rican, Dominican and South American.

However, the numbers of Mexicans in New York City surged, swelling from 6,740 in 1980 to 183,813 in 2000 to 319,263 in 2010. Just in the last decade, that represented a 74 percent increase, with a 118 percent increase alone in the Bronx (representing the second-highest percentage increase, after Staten Island's 154 percent rise). Meanwhile, Puerto Rican growth dropped by 11.2 percent citywide, Dominican growth rose slightly by 8.2 percent, Central American growth inched up by 7.9 percent, and the South American population increased by 5.4 percent.

The Mexican population increase has been matched by the numbers of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans enrolling at CUNY, Hershenson said, noting: "I am extremely proud that from 2000 to 2010, while CUNY enrollments went up 38 percent and Hispanic enrollments went up 51 percent, Mexican and Mexican-American enrollments went up 225 percent."

Substantial changes to that demographic urban landscape propelled CUNY to examine its own role and a recognition that it could provide greater opportunities to strengthen not just academic offerings but community and civic ties, and elevate research relevant to the institution and city.

The announcement this May about the institute followed years of work by the CUNY Working Task Force on Strengthening Educational Opportunities for the Mexican and Mexican-American Community. The task force has assembled conferences on Mexican immigration since 2006, and this year's institute launch was wedded to a conference focused on health issues impacting the Mexican community.

Co-sponsored by the task force, the Office of the President of Lehman College, the CUNY Institute for Health Equity, the Lehman Department of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies and Mi Casa es Puebla, the "Salud! Beyond Deficits and Paradoxes in Mexican Immigration and Health" conference recruited nationally recognized experts on Mexican immigration and health – all under the Institute's auspices.

"This is a model that has to be replicated all over the United States," Carlos Sada, consul general of Mexico in New York, said of the Institute at the recent celebration. "It is something stimulating and motivating. I hope we continue opening more possibilities for students."

For the past several years, the consul general’s office has funded scholarships for Mexican and Mexican-American CUNY enrollees. Most recently, a gift of $60,000 through the IME Becas (Instituto de Mexicanos en el..."
Exterior) provided full-tuition scholarships for the next academic year for up to a dozen undergraduates.

The Institute isn’t narrowly focused on helping one institution in the Bronx, but is spreading its wings across the region. With a special focus on Mexicans in the diaspora, particularly Mexicans in New York, the Institute provides a virtual — and soon, literal — space for the Mexican community to consider its own and an institutional location for support of scholarly and community advocacy projects.

Fundamental to its success will be the ability to advance new projects with community and cultural organizations, to shepherd projects already underway, and to build on existing efforts within and outside of CUNY.

Discussing its mission with The Hispanic Outlook before the celebratory event, institute acting director Dr. Alyshia Gálvez explained that it would promote research support, forge ties with community and civic groups and organizations, and provide advocacy.

For students, the Institute will strengthen Mexican and Mexican-American studies within the CUNY system, which is comprised of a quarter-million students on 23 campuses, and hopes to spearhead the addition of a Mexican studies certificate for MS and MA students in several disciplines, including education, nursing and speech.

“’This is a community that can really benefit from more knowledge, more resources, more advocacy and more strategic and explicit connections between social service, community and educational institutions,” Gálvez said. “The Mexican community offers so much to New York City, and at the same time New York offers so much to the Mexican community.”

Gálvez credited Hershenson with embracing a longstanding vision to connect more comprehensively with the Mexican and Mexican-American communities, particularly amid a climate in which there was not a widespread recognition of — and reaction to — its sizeable growth.

“He was looking to make sure they were enrolling at CUNY in the proportionate numbers to their population, and conducted recruitment drives and job fairs,” said Gálvez, who is within Lehman’s Department of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies and has written extensively about issues affecting Mexican immigrants.

In 2005, Hershenson founded the Taskforce for Mexican and Mexican-American Educational Futures and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with then-Consul General Arturo Sarukhan, who now serves as ambassador of Mexico to the United States. That initiative forged strong ties between CUNY and Mexico.

“I became very concerned when two pieces of data came to my attention. The first was that the Mexican-American community was the fastest-growing of the large immigrant groups in New York City,” Hershenson said. “At the same time, the college-preparation rate and in particular the number of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans here in New York City who had bachelor’s degrees was substantially lower than one out of 10; it’s about half a percent.”

“It became clear to me that large numbers of children were growing up in households where a college education was not easily visible, unlike my own home, where children have easy access to a computer and books and discussions about college simply because there are members of this family household who attended college,’” Hershenson said.

Hershenson was further inspired because, he said, whenever he would enter a restaurant, invariably the cook, waitress, dishwasher or busboy were from Mexico. The administrator was concerned that these workers were not gaining access to opportunities on the other side of the food service industry, and unable to navigate a clear pathway to receive education and achieve certification.

As a result, CUNY additionally facilitated programs such as a workers certificate program in the hospitality industry, and devoted more attention to charting inroads with organizations rooted in Mexican-American causes. At the same time, Hershenson acknowledged that professors across the CUNY spectrum were conducting research or writing for publications about the Mexican culture, needs and demographics.

“A number of professors in the system and in particular Alyshia Gálvez have long worked in very positive ways on research relating the Mexican and Mexican-American communities,” he said.

Over the last two years, Hershenson worked with colleagues to draft a proposal for the institute, and the proposal received a thumbs-up from CUNY’s Board of Trustees on Feb. 2 to provide an umbrella linking and facilitating research and programming across the system.

The goal presented then, and being worked toward now, is to foster and channel work in which CUNY faculty, administrators and students already have been engaged to serve the area’s Mexican community.

“To be able to put the resources of this institution to work for this community that I care deeply about was something I thought was very important and I wanted to be involved in,” Gálvez said.

She said that in 2000 “you could count on one hand the number of organizations specifically dedicated to the Mexican community. That’s not the case anymore. Ten years later, the community is much bigger, and everyone is working very hard and trying to get the job done for the community.”

The Institute is growing in momentum, and one aspect Gálvez was focused on this summer was identifying and creating a space at Lehman to house programs and events, space she hoped could come online when the campus opens a new science building this fall.

Gálvez is strategizing to eventually have visiting scholars and graduate and undergraduate assistanceships. As she moves ahead, she hopes to
to have a presence throughout the CUNY system,” Gálvez said. “At this point, many faculty think this is a no-brainer, but there are others who are not clued in to the growth of the Mexican community or the larger context of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Mexico and the political and economic importance of that relationship. My hope is that in 10 years that will be moot. By then, we will have a very mature landscape.”

Funding and grants will be key, but institutional buy-in is not something she has had to worry about, with support already at the top echelons, from Lehman College President Ricardo R. Fernández to CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein.

“Lehman College is proud to provide a home for this important CUNY initiative, which will focus on both academics and service, providing a hub for research and advocacy projects throughout the university and the region,” Fernández said.

Over the summer, Gálvez focused as well on assembling an advisory board, and stressed that she was not looking to pad the board with high-profile names but hard workers.

“I know a lot of boards are designed as status opportunities, but I am interested in a working board. I want someone who wants to roll up his or her sleeves. It’s not going to be about people’s CVs or their high-level positions; it’s going to be about people who are willing to do the work,” she said.

Its success could be déjà vu for CUNY, which has launched similar efforts in the past to much success. In fact, CUNY is steeped in connections with the communities it serves, and has included centers for Puerto Rican and Dominican studies since the late 1960s.

“One of the things that has to happen here is this institute has to develop the same level of stature that the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute has, the only one of its kind in the entire United States,” Hershenson said.

“CUNY obviously has a long history of serving the public and providing undergraduate and graduate education at a reasonable cost to the residents of the city of New York,” said Dr. Laird Bergad, distinguished professor of Latin American and Caribbean history in the Department of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies at Lehman and the Ph.D. program in history at the Graduate Center. “What is occurring is a massive transformation from a demographic point of view. It is logical for us to move in this direction.”

Bergad, the founding director of the CUNY Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies, said that “CUNY is not an isolated ivory tower type of institution like the Ivy Leagues. It’s not Columbia, it’s not NYU, and it’s not the New School. CUNY is connected to a very diverse population, and that’s not something novel but part of its mission.”

He predicted that the Institute was going to be a “smashing success.”

“This is going to be a very productive kind of center in terms of its academic output. What we will probably see is the generation of all kinds of interesting reports and studies about Mexicans in the tri-state area,” Bergad said. “I think you will see a very vivacious series of public events that are both academic and community-oriented, which ought to draw fairly large audiences, and I think this is something that is of extraordinary importance because it is the first and only institute of this nature east of Chicago.”

At the celebratory event at CUNY’s Graduate Center, a crowd had begun to form within an hour of the event. Noshing on appetizers and refreshments, one could see people from all corners of New York City. New York City elected officials - of Dominican and African-American heritage - were on hand. A slideshow on stage presented pictures showcasing academia, history, culture and advocacy.

When the crowd was asked to identify a little about what brought them there, the most sizeable show of hands took place when students lifted their hands.

“I want you to consider this your home,” Gálvez said of the new institute, after encouraging several of her institute colleagues to stand on stage with her.

Other speakers spoke of the broader messages being delivered beyond the walls of academia, noting the international ties between countries and the impacts on culture, history and the economy.

“This is more than just about academia,” said Arturo Sarukhan, ambassador of Mexico to the United States. “It is about one critical challenge: convincing Mexicans and Americans that they need to remain stakeholders to each other’s success, to each other’s security, to each other’s disparity and to each other’s well-being.”

“If you stop and think for a minute, there is no country more important to the future of prosperity in the United States than Mexico and vice versa,” he said. “One of the most pressing challenges to the empowerment of Latinos and the Mexican-American community in the U.S. is education. We have the highest dropout rates of teenagers in high school. We have to provide them with a ladder so they can continue to climb and successfully integrate into the fabric of American society. This institute will do that. This institute is one of the most welcome initiatives.”