

[CAMPUS PRACTICE]

Borders and Boundaries: Human Rights and Social Justice in a Transnational Context

■ **BILLIE DRAKEFORD**, student development coordinator in the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning; **SYLVIA ESCARCEGA**, assistant professor of Latin American and Latino studies; and **CHARLES R. STRAIN**, associate vice president for academic affairs and professor of religious studies—all at DePaul University

Immigration has become a “hot button” issue in the 2008 presidential campaigns. Candidates outdo one another in declaring how tightly they would seal our borders, especially the southern one. Yet Mexican and Central American migrants appear in these discussions only as objects of policy proposals. No one seems to consider walking even

In Stage One, students work with two faculty members to explore the history of U.S. relationships with Mexico, giving particular attention to migration, labor, and policy issues. Discussions ready students for the physical and emotional rigors of living in makeshift housing with migrants who work in the *maquiladora* industry (consisting of assembly factories

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a footstep in the shoes of people who are literally “dying to get in.”

Our students have walked in those shoes. Since 1994, DePaul University students have examined globalization and migration, human rights across borders, and race and racism on both sides of The Wall. The Nogales Study Abroad program explores these issues at the border between cultures and nations, in a transnational community where first and third worlds collide.

Nogales Program Structure and Pedagogies

The Nogales Study Abroad program unfolds in three distinct stages:

- An autumn quarter preparatory phase
- The twelve-day trip to the Arizona/Sonora borderlands
- A winter quarter reflection, action, and synthesis stage

in “tariff-free” zones established beginning in the 1960s) in Nogales, Sonora. Students prepare themselves to meet with migrants desperately seeking jobs on either side of the border to support their families.

In Stage Two, faculty and students spend twelve days on both sides of the Arizona/Sonora border. Through the mediation of Borderlinks, a binational educational organization, we meet with migrants, *maquiladora* workers, human rights activists, religious leaders, refugee lawyers, directors of NGOs involved in microfinance and community development, mural artists, border patrol officers, and representatives of the American criminal justice system. Students absorb multiple points of view about the central issues we discuss during the course.

This stage of the program in particular gains its strength from a variety of pedagogies, including experiential learning,

discussion, and reflection activities. In one event that could not have been replicated in the classroom, students spoke with migrants in a plaza in Altar, Sonora, a small town that has become a stopping point for migrants headed north. Days later, they saw some of the same migrants in a Tucson courtroom, caught in the snares of the U.S. criminal justice system. During the trip, nightly group reflections help participants to contextualize their experiences. Students also keep journals of their readings, experiences, and reflections. They later refer to these journals as guides to analyze specific issues and to develop guidelines for social justice.

In Stage Three, back in Chicago, some students engage in university-sponsored service learning projects in Chicago’s Latino communities, linking the global and the local. Other students take initiative to develop long-term projects focused on social justice issues in the DePaul community and beyond. Students also read further about the issues they studied experientially, continuing to process their experiences through class reflections and a final synthesizing paper.

Course Themes and Learning Outcomes

The program’s outcomes cluster around three themes: Globalization and migration, human rights across borders, and issues of race and racism. The words of the students themselves best reveal the depth of student learning.

Emily, a senior political science major, wrote a paper that focused on the global economy. She stated:

I see the beginning of a story for a just society. Essential to facing the problems of economic oppression is being willing to move beyond the easy response of paralysis that often comes with hopelessness. I was very deeply impacted by the fact that it is really our northern privilege that prevents us from

acting and perpetuates complacency with injustice [through neoliberal economic policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement].

Reclaiming responsibility for one's own choices, Emily concluded, is key to moving beyond a paralyzing despair.

Charlene, a sophomore accounting major, focused on worker's rights. Her understanding of those rights was cemented by her visceral experience in a Mexican assembly factory:

I walked into the *Maquiladora* with a frown on my face . . . [we encountered the possibility of] great health risk or injury because of the chemicals and substances used . . . The noise was so heavy on my ears that it made every other sound seem dead to me . . . [the workers] were forced to stand on bare wooden floor[s] . . .

Charlene concluded that transnational corporations should take immediate action to improve working conditions in the *maquiladoras*.

Alejandro, a junior music major, focused on the public murals and graffiti art that adorn the Mexican side of The Wall. His paper was itself an act of reclaiming identity as he reflected on the art of *La Frontera*.

For a long time, I have struggled to claim a cultural identity. I never seemed to be "latino" or "Asian" enough. As a result of my marginalization, I have had to create an identity for myself . . . My existence as a mestizo . . . becomes a political existence, a position that allows me to challenge and contest any binary opposition and labels that are placed upon me and other marginalized/oppressed people . . . But being mestizo is not just an ethnic identity. For me [...] it can mean any set of mixed identities: spiritual,



DePaul students paint a community center in Nogales, Sonora. (Photo from the Nogales files of S. Escarcega)

cultural, or social . . . In this sense, everyone is a mestizo. But for some reason, we have managed to create divisions within ourselves that cause us to deny our *mestizaje*; we are unable to struggle with the idea that we could be many things at once.

These students' claiming of their own voices is one of the most powerful outcomes of the Nogales program. Our students have learned to speak with words far more eloquent than those

pre-scripted for the presidential candidates. They describe a future shared with our hemispheric neighbors, a future characterized not by walls built in a futile effort to exclude desperate people but by acceptance of our own responsibility to our neighbors. If their actions following the trip are any indication, our students are developing the tools to improve conditions locally for people in Chicago and globally for people not only in Sonora but in places like Belize, Honduras, and Colombia. ☐

Civic Engagement after Nogales

After returning from the border, students have reached out to both local and global communities through a variety of projects oriented toward service and increased awareness. These have included:

- Providing after-school tutoring programs for children and education for immigrants who are studying to pass citizenship tests in Chicago's Latino neighborhoods
- Performing poems, songs, and monologues that reflect on transnational issues at campus and community events
- Presenting their experiences at an international conference focused on indigenous peoples' struggles for human rights
- Promoting Just Coffee (www.justcoffee.org), a Chiapas- and Sonora-based cooperative movement, in coffee shops across the city
- Organizing the DePaul Medical Brigades, which (under the direction of a single student) delivered medical supplies to outlying villages in Honduras in December 2007

—Billie Drakeford, Sylvia Escarcega, and Charles R. Strain