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School of Social Work professor Alejandro Garcia, an expert on such topics as Latino families, Latino elderly, and HIV/AIDS, teaches students to embrace diversity and celebrate who they are.

“We want to help people think about a perspective that may be different from their own.”

—Alejandro Garcia

Promoting an Appreciation for Diversity

School of Social Work professor Alejandro Garcia does more than teach people to understand diversity. He lives it through involvement with initiatives that help people appreciate those different from themselves.

Garcia, who has been on the SU faculty since 1978, teaches the course Human Diversity; advises a Latino fraternity; produces books about such topics as Latino families, Latino elderly, and HIV/AIDS; writes on these and other issues like the Confederate flag debate and the anti-gay murder of Matthew Shepard; and speaks to various groups about diversity issues. “I try to make myself available to any group on campus or elsewhere,” he says. “It’s important to me.”

Promoting an appreciation for diversity begins with understanding and appreciating oneself, Garcia believes. He finds that his students, most of whom are non-Hispanic whites, often don’t know much about their ethnic backgrounds. “They don’t know who they are,” he says. “I try to help them know, appreciate, celebrate, and accept themselves. I encourage people to celebrate who they are.”

Garcia, who grew up in southern Texas and earned a doctorate in welfare policy from Brandeis University’s Heller School, also wants his students to become aware of their biases, beginning with the assumption that all people have them. “We’re socialized that way,” he says. “Some biases we’re conscious of, others we aren’t.” Once his students start to understand their own biases, they begin to understand people of other cultures and ethnic backgrounds, he says.

During the nearly 15 years that Garcia has taught the diversity course, its focus has widened with society’s concerns. When he began, he taught mainly about racial and ethnic diversity. Since then, he has added gender issues and sexual orientation to the list of topics.

One way Garcia celebrates his own Mexican-American heritage is by advising Phi Iota Alpha, a Latino fraternity on campus. “It was important for them to have a Latino advisor,” he says.

One of Garcia’s most recent books, *La Familia: Traditions and Realities*, deals with issues faced by elderly Hispanics, and the special support they need. It was edited with Marta Sotomayor, and published by the National Hispanic Council on Aging. “This is a growing population with important needs,” he says, “including health care, housing, and income management.” When dealing with Hispanic seniors, more emphasis is placed on helping their families care for them at home rather than in nursing homes, Garcia says. This is because the elderly have important roles in Latino families: mediating family disputes, socializing grandchildren, and passing on family and cultural history.

Garcia’s interest in HIV/AIDS resulted in another book, *HIV Affected and Vulnerable Youth: Prevention Issues and Approaches*, which he co-edited with School of Social Work colleague Susan Taylor-Brown. “We’re very concerned about children in families

with members who have HIV or AIDS," he says. "How do we help these young people and prevent them from self-destructing or becoming infected themselves? We need to help them face the disease and the prejudice that exists against persons with HIV/AIDS."

This issue is especially important to people of color in this country, Garcia says, because more than 80 percent of women and children who have HIV/AIDS are African American or Hispanic. He also worries that many people consider the AIDS crisis a thing of the past, because new drugs can make the disease chronic rather than fatal. Not only does the drug regimen not work for everyone, he points out, but the cost is prohibitive for people who are poor or without health insurance.

Garcia tackles these and other issues in Knight-Ridder News Service syndicated op-ed columns he pens with fellow social work professors Taylor-Brown and Eric Kingson. Garcia knows many readers disagree with their viewpoints, but that's OK with him.

"We simply present a point of view," he says. "We want to help people think about a perspective that may be different from their own."

—CYNTHIA MORITZ

Energizing Latino-Latin American Studies

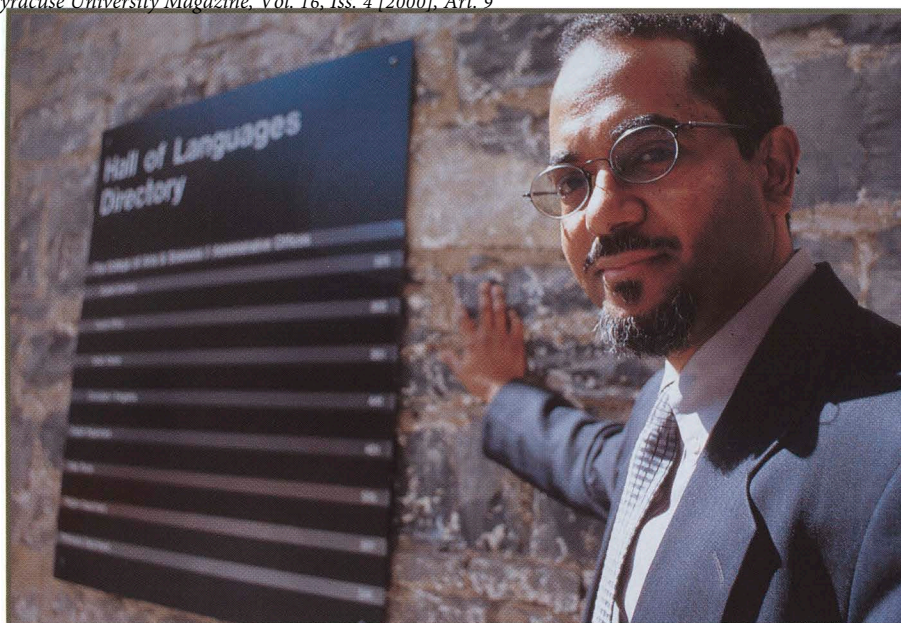
When Professor Silvio Torres-Saillant was appointed director of SU's Latino-Latin American Studies Program last year, he was aware of the challenges awaiting him. But he also knew there was no better time to strengthen the program. "We are at a good moment in ethnic studies in the United States," he says. "We have reached a moment of self-awareness. Learning about Latin Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans is learning about us."

The development of the Latino-Latin American Studies Program has been a gradual process. A student committee was formed in 1994 to bring the program on par with SU's African American Studies Program. The students reviewed curriculum outlines from universities across the country and created a proposal. Efforts to strengthen the curriculum and generate student interest continued for nearly three years. Last year, the University formed an advisory board to implement some of the committee's suggestions. The work ultimately led to the selection of Torres-Saillant as director.

An interdisciplinary concentration offered through the College of Arts and Sciences, the program currently offers 11 courses that support the curriculum's two components: a Latin American component emphasizing Latin American culture and society, and a Latino component focusing on ethnic studies of Hispanics in the United States.

Torres-Saillant, a native of the Dominican Republic, is optimistic that the growing public interest in and increased media attention to global relations and economic interdependence will encourage students of all ethnic backgrounds to consider the program. "It is extremely important that we have a diverse group of students," he says. "That is the only way this will become a valid field of study at SU. The program will not succeed if it relies on the interest of just those students with ethnic ties to Latin American countries."

Torres-Saillant views his own immigrant experience as just one



College of Arts and Sciences professor Silvio Torres-Saillant is the new director of SU's Latino-Latin American Studies Program. He plans to establish a clear identity for the program and expand its offerings.

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part of his journey to adulthood. "I was brought here by my mother in 1973," he says. "But I had the adaptability typical of the age. I wasn't much occupied with the full meaning of the change."

Among the most important things Torres-Saillant brought with him to the United States was a highly developed love of literature. "My father was a well-read man, and some of that was passed down," he says. "He was very proud of the fact that he knew things."

After earning a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Brooklyn College, Torres-Saillant studied comparative literature at New York University—earning master's and doctoral degrees. Prior to coming to SU, Torres-Saillant held several appointments in the English department at City University of New York, where he also launched the university's Dominican Studies Institute.

Torres-Saillant is a self-described activist on how Latin culture is interpreted in this country, and how Latin immigrants have integrated into American society. At SU, he wants to help the Latino-Latin American Studies Program establish a clear identity within the University community and beyond. His first priority is to expand the Latino component of the program and improve its offerings, he says.

Over the next year, Latino-Latin American studies students will have more choices than ever before—including a new course on Hispanic-Caribbean literature. This fall, a course on Hispanic-Jewish relations is planned. Eventually, Torres-Saillant would like to see the program occupy a designated space on campus that would include a reference library, a reading room, offices, and a conference room.

Miguel Rosero Alarcon, a student who served on the advisory board that approved Torres-Saillant's appointment, says he is optimistic about the future of Latino-Latin American studies at SU. "Professor Torres-Saillant is excellent for the program and will enhance students' past efforts," he says.

For Torres-Saillant, coming to SU to build upon the program was an enticing career move. "This program really is just beginning and beginnings are inherently utopian," he says. While he is aware of the idealism surrounding the program, he also is respectful of its tumultuous history. "This is the first time that a director has been hired specifically for this program," he says. "So, it is a major step."

—TAMMY DIDOMENICO