Cultivando Sabiduría (Cultivating Wisdom): Latinx Immigrant Elders and Civic Engagement

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Abstract

This article describes a program, *Cultivando Sabiduría* (Cultivating Wisdom), that was created to honor and further ignite civic engagement in low-income, Spanish-speaking Latinx elders. *Cultivando Sabiduría* utilized a popular education pedagogical approach and culturally validating curriculum. Methodological and theoretical innovations aided in recognizing program participants' strengths. Discussion is provided on the social and health benefits of volunteering and civic engagement for Latinx elders. The 177 Latinx program participants were ages 55+ years old and primarily low income with low (formal) educational levels. Program impacts included identification of the strengths of the elders in terms of civic engagement and community leadership, feelings of belonging, and the culturally and linguistically relevant literacy activities offered by the program.

Keywords: elders, Latinxs, civic engagement, popular education, community cultural wealth, Spanish-speaking, literacy, immigration

Introduction

"I am very proud and for my daughters to know that I did not have any schooling, but at 79 years old I am achieving my goals that I set out for myself. I love being a *promotora* for EMASS because I am learning and I am helping my community."

Doña Carmen, a student in the *Cultivando Sabiduría*, provided a vivid insight about the multilayered impact of the program. This paper will present a detailed description of *Cultivando Sabiduría*, a program created to ignite the civic engagement of Latinx[1] elders. It will also describe the impact on civic engagement, leadership development, and feelings of belonging of immigrant Latinx elders.

There are 58 million Latinx elders in the United States (U.S. Census 2018). By 2060, the number of elder Latinxs in the U.S. is projected to nearly triple from 8 million to 21.5 million (National Hispanic Council on Aging 2017) and will account for 22% of all people ages

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1   The word "Latinx" is used as a non-binaristic, gender-inclusive term to describe individuals with heritage or immigration from Latin America, Central America, and Mexico (DeGuzmán 2017).

65 and older (Larson, Mathews, Torres, and Lea 2017). Currently, 70% of all elder Latinxs reside in just four states, California, Texas, Florida, and New York, with the highest concentration in California (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). In San Diego County, Latinxs account for 34% of the total resident population (County of San Diego Community Health Statistics Unit 2018). For the communities participating in this project (i.e., Vista, San Marcos, Escondido), Latinxs represent 48% to 51% of subpopulations (ibid). Additional characteristics include: 30% of Latinxs are foreign born, and nearly one in five (16%) are age 65 or older (ibid). The region has a significant elder Latinx population.

While Latinx elders are among the fastest growing elderly populations in the United States (Hummer and Hayward 2015), they have extremely low traditional forms of civic participation (García Bedolla 2012). The present program sought to measure common cultural and social factors that promote civic behavior and patterns of engagement in traditional political involvement (e.g., voting, volunteering for candidates or political organizations, contributions to campaigns) and in non-traditional civic engagement activities (e.g., grassroots efforts aimed to shape local initiatives or produce positive social change at the community level) among Latinx elders. The program also sought to measure outcomes of engagement on the health and wellness of Latinx elders.

Civic Engagement for Latinxs in San Diego

In the last decade, San Diego County's percentage of the Latinx population has increased from 27 to 32 percent. In selected cities and neighborhoods, Latinxs account for 50 to 60 percent of the population. Locally collected data indicate they are disengaged from civic life and have the lowest voter count and rate of voter turnout (Baldassare, Bonner, Kordus, and Lopes 2016).

San Diego County follows state and national trends of low Latinx political engagement (García Bedolla 2012; Dobar et al. 2016). In California, Whites are overrepresented in almost every political activity, particularly when it comes to contributing money to political campaigns and writing to elected officials. On a national level, Latinxs are the most civically alienated group and the least likely to be broadly engaged (Sullivan and Godsay 2014).

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement advises that Latinxs must be connected to community-based activities where their contributions to public issues are valued and their efforts yield concrete results beyond the ballot box (Sullivan and Godsay 2014). In this study, we measure the extent to which the *Cultivando Sabiduría* curriculum proactively affirms the wealth of experiences, promise, and practice of Latinx elders. The curriculum is explicitly informed by the theoretical framework by Tara Yosso (2006); Critical Life Course (Stroller and Gibson 1999); and The Basic Needs of Elders (Atchley and Barusch 1994; Putri and Lestari 2017), all of which are described below.

Research on Elders and Civic Engagement

Studies of civic engagement interventions for older adults tend to promote well-being. For example, the RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance) study, involving a five-session multicomponent intervention with 34 elders aged 63-95 who attended an adult day health service program, found an increase in feelings of usefulness and a higher sense of purpose in life compared to elders in the control group. According to the researchers, civic engagement is found to "benefit greatly from remaining engaged with their communities through such activities as volunteering, intergenerational mentoring, and social and political activism. These benefits include gains in emotional and physical well-being, improved mortality rates, and increased cognitive activity" (Dabelko-Schoeny, Anderson, and Spinks 2010:694).

Similarly, Gonzales, Matz-Costa, and Morrow-Howell (2015) found that "productive engagement can lead to multiple positive ends: offsetting fiscal strains of a larger older population, contributing to the betterment of families and civil society, and maintaining the health and economic security of older adults" (252). Specifically, for older adults, volunteering has substantial benefits, including positive psychosocial outcomes, such as reduced depressive symptoms, higher quality of life, and increased social supports and networks; increased physical health such as functional independence, fewer doctor-di-

agnosed conditions, and lower mortality; and, increased cognitive health such as mental status, memory, and executive function (Anderson et al. 2014).

Although the literature on older Americans and civic engagement is robust, it lacks focus on elders of color. The current study attempts to redress this omission and create new understandings of Latinx elders.

Research on Latinx Elders and Civic Engagement

The issue of Latinxs and voting continues to be part of national conversations, particularly during election cycles. Civic engagement (in traditional and nontraditional forms) is crucially needed to support our democracy. However, the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) found that the 2014 congressional election turnout rate (41.9 percent) was the lowest since 1978. It was 7.0 percentage points lower than in 1978 and down from the 45.5 percent turnout of the 2010 congressional election.

Latinxs in particular experienced a dramatic decline in voting rates from 1978 to 2014, dropping to a rate lower than their eligibility by 4.1 percentage points in the 2014 election. In California, Latinxs are the largest ethnic group. However, California Latinxs are vastly underrepresented in every level of government, even as they become the largest ethnic group in the state (Leadership California Institute 2015).

Research provides some insights to the experiences of Latinx elders in terms of their connection to civic engagement. Hilton et al. (2012) found that Latinx elders successfully age by "maintaining a positive outlook, living in the present, enjoying a sense of community, and relying on spirituality and family for comfort and meaning as they age" (183). However, much of the scholarship about Latinx elders focuses on their many challenges, such as housing (Lopez 2017) and health (Rote and Markides 2014). While we do not argue with the accuracy of these findings, we do believe that we must focus on other aspects of Latinx elders' lives as they relate to personal and family resiliency, community contributions, and goal achievement.

Latinx elders are underrepresented in senior center programs and public recreational activities (Fukui et al. 2015). Programs available to Latinx seniors are often tailored to English-speaking Latinxs only. Programs are often not linguistically or culturally relevant for Latina elders. Programs are often located in areas outside of Latinx communities, making transportation to and from sites difficult (National Latinx Research Center 2017). While participation in senior centers is low for Latinas, informal volunteering activities such as helping friends and neighbors, and being engaged in neighborhood or community matters is prevalent (Gonzales et al. 2015).

In terms of political participation and civic engagement, the National Hispanic Council on Aging (2011) reported that elder Latinxs voted in the 2010 elections at about the same rate as the national average (45%). However, in this same election, only 7 percent of voters were Latinx. The National Hispanic Council on Aging argued that culturally and linguistically competent efforts are needed to increase elder Latinx turnout and encourage other forms of participation. *Cultivando Sabiduría* answers this call.

Theory

The program *Cultivando Sabiduría* is based on two foundational theoretical frameworks. Community Cultural Wealth is utilized for its asset-oriented orientation (honoring the wisdom the elders already possess) and Critical Life Course theory for its focus on elders.

Community Cultural Wealth

We draw upon Tara Yosso's (2006) theory of cultural wealth, which describes a set of beliefs and practices that originate from family and culture that are sources of strength. Her theory is in response to a deficit model perspective that views Latinxs as having insufficient cultural capital that leads to, for example, low educational outcomes.

Yosso's six types of cultural wealth capital highlight the strengths that Latinx elders already possess: aspirational (hopes and dreams), linguistic (power of storytelling), familial (working as a collective), social (working with neighbors), navigational (street smarts and survival), and resistance (encountering and dealing with oppressive conditions).
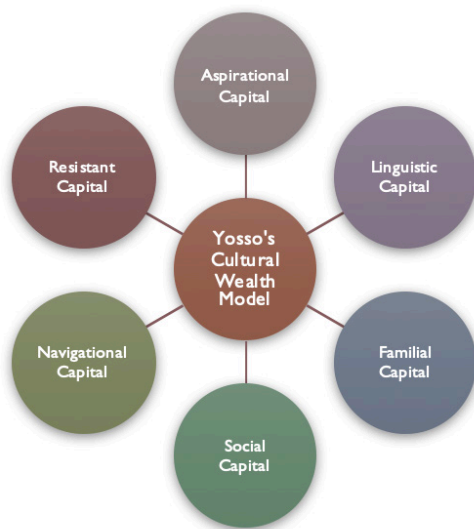
Figure 1: Community Cultural Wealth Model

We believe that Latinx elders, as viewed through a cultural wealth model, have an incredible capacity to participate in civic engagement. The Cultivando Sabiduría curriculum operationalizes the "cultural wealth" model. The research approach to study this curriculum similarly reflects a strength-based approach, rather than a deficit model.

By providing linguistically and culturally relevant civic engagement curriculum and presenting it in a collaborative, highly participatory pedagogical style, Cultivando Sabiduría builds upon the participants' strengths consisting of the knowledge and skills they have honed through their life experiences. Therefore, we hypothesized that participants graduating from the ten-week course would have increased knowledge of civic society and increased activity in both traditional and nontraditional forms of civic engagement.

Life Course Theories

We also draw from a Life Course Perspective (Stroller and Gibson, 1999; Elder, Kirkpatrick, and Crosnoe 2003) and Life Course Developmental Theory (Elder, 1998, 2008) to inform program curricula; language, reading, and writing; resources; and other tools. Life Course frameworks

describe the interactive and shaping impact of five major social forces experienced across the human life course. *Social Positioning* refers to age, race/ethnicity and gender, immigration status, ascribed statuses, etc. *Opportunity Structures* is defined by present and historical opportunity pathways that exist based on the meanings that social positioning holds within time or place. *Historical Events* describes the societal events/responses, social policies, laws, and historical social contexts such as chronic prejudicial and discriminatory climates influencing individuals collectively and in the present. *Personal History* refers to marriages, family, children, births, deaths, widowhood, divorce, changing health status, income, education, work, immigration climate, and experience with social prejudice and discrimination by individuals or to those to whom they relate. *Adaptive Resources* refers to support systems, such as family and friend support networks, community cultural wealth, and cultural context (e.g., cultural practices, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations regarding life, family, and health), as well as other important sources for coping (e.g., religion, faith communities, education, and community programs).

Additionally, the concept of intersectionality is important to understand the life course framework (Collins and Bilge 2016) because it recognizes that there are multiple forms of stratification that exist, support, and maintain opportunity structures. Each exerts influence at the same time, such that intersecting social statuses produce unique paths for human experiences.

The educational curricula in *Cultivando Sabiduría* embed a life course framework into English as a Second Language and Literacy and Writing courses to ensure relevant materials are used and participants' strengths are acknowledged. The curriculum planning was extensively researched and designed to be reflective of common life course experiences of the participants of Cultivando Sabiduría.

Program Description: *Cultivando Sabiduría*

Cultivando Sabiduría offered a weekly 3-hour class using the best practices for organizing a civic and culturally appropriate education curriculum. It was held in the heart of a Latinx immigrant community of North County, San

Diego, where the census tract data indicate only 17% of the population attained a high school degree. The National Latino Research Center at the California State University San Marcos led this initiative through a grant from AmeriCorps (#17REHCA002).

In *Cultivando Sabiduría*, the material was presented through a culturally responsive lens in English, Spanish, and bilingual formats that resonated with participants' histories and lived experiences. The program was offered in a safe and supportive environment. Note: the program developed to meet the needs of Latinx elders after analyzing data based on a general, intergenerational civic engagement and leadership program based on popular education called *Cultivando Liderazgo* (Nurturing Leadership). (See Nuñez-Alvarez et al. 2018 for more details about this program.) Both programs emerged from the National Latino Research Center and were supported by AmeriCorps grants.

A hallmark of the effectiveness of the program is that the entire community shares learning together. The program recognizes the importance of the extended family and the need for a comprehensive approach to education and political integration (Wilkin et al. 2009). The class was often attended by children or grandchildren, or other extended kin; rather than restricting others, the students' guests were welcomed in class. Helping Latino elders gain cultural and social capital was an explicit part of the curriculum (Segura et al. 2001).

The *Cultivando Sabiduría* curriculum connected volunteering and civic engagement to students' lives. The program aimed to present basic requirements, roles, and responsibilities of an engaged citizenry; discuss issues of transportation, land use, sustainability, health, education, public safety, and business to examine multiple perspectives; bring to life cultural wisdom and community history; and tap into the exceptional minds and talents of elders to develop innovative ideas that can benefit the entire community.

Through a series of speakers, field trips/tours, and in-class activities, students gathered information about the issues mentioned above and met leaders in the field to decide what they wanted to do to tackle these local problems. Thus, *Cultivando Sabiduría* became an important site for Latino elders in the region seeking to make a difference in their communities. For example, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), San Diego region's primary public planning, transportation, and research agency, sought the input of the *Cultivando Sabiduría* students on the 2021 Regional Plan.

Meeting the Needs of Elders

The program strove to meet the fundamental needs of older persons. Increase of well-being is strongly linked to *Safety, Self-Identity, Security* (i.e., emotional and/or future place), *Relevance* (i.e., acknowledgment of their knowledge and importance), *Companionship, Independence,* and *Social Participation* (i.e., educational growth opportunities for social awareness and social and civic participation etc.) (Bruggencate, Luijkx, and Stum 2018).

Culturally Validating Curriculum

The *Cultivando Sabiduría* classes were developed in response to learning about gaps in service delivering for Latino elders in our region, research on the best practices for Latino elders, the collective experiences of the National Latino Research Center team, and the scholarly expertise of Dr. Alicia Gonzales, an expert on ethnogerontology, Latino communities, and life course developmental aging.

The curriculum is linguistically and culturally relevant. Dr. Gonzales has guided the curriculum to occur within a "safe environment" and is informed by four central elements needed for elders to be supported and thrive. These elements are visualized in Figure 2.

We intentionally created the program so that elders would feel useful (Relevance). We provided support for coping (Security/Companionship). We amplified and included celebrations (Self-Identity). We also included activities related to civic engagement and community volunteerism that had achievable goals.

Additionally, the program was built to address elements of well-being for elders in the community, including field trips and other activities. Recall, Bruggencate and colleagues (2018) explained that an increase of well-being is strongly linked to *Safety, Self-Identity, Security* (i.e., emotional and/or future place), *Relevance* (i.e., acknowledgment of their knowledge and importance), *Compan-*
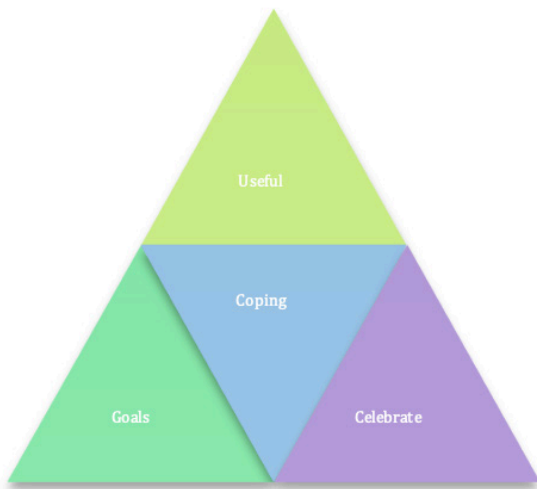
Figure 2: Elements to supporting and encouraging elders.

ionship, *Independence,* and *Social Participation* (i.e., educational growth opportunities for social awareness and social and civic participation etc.). See Table 1 for how these elements were embedded into *Cultivando Sabiduría*.

Finally, it was crucial to have the majority of the students, volunteers, and staff be Latinx and bilingual. Further, all members of the *Cultivando Sabiduría* team were trained in culturally sensitive research methods and pedagogy. Working collectively, they assisted in teaching the classes and providing one-on-one attention to the elders.

Typical Schedule

Cultivando Sabiduría met each Thursday morning from 9am to 11am. However, the students would usually arrive at 8am and were often found waiting at the locked door of the community center. The students usually stayed until noon.

Cultivando Sabiduría began with refreshments and mingling until 9am. Students brought homemade treats and brewed coffee provided by the community center. The expansive room was always filled with the buzz of conversation as students arrived, greeting each other and catching up with each other about the week.

When class began, the students then gathered as a

group to begin the first interactive module using popular education pedagogy (9-10am). These **health and wellness sessions** were led by multicultural elder service provider Rosa López, who provided lectures, offered activities such as Zumba and stretching, and invited guests to share about health and wellness. Every Thursday, she invited a presenter from various social service agencies to talk about different resources available for them.

Then, the students were free to choose between four offerings for the remaining time: crafting (*manualidades*), technology (using phone, tablet and computer features), Spanish literacy (reading, writing), and English literacy (reading, writing, and speaking). The result was that the literacy classes were one of the most popular classes.

Attendance and Participation

At any given time, 30 to 40 students attended class. Because of their advanced age and various health challenges, students missed class for several weeks and then returned. *Sabiduría* classes continually evolved to engage in the elders' critical thinking, health, and creativity. The highest attendance days were for celebratory events such as Mother's Day and community field trips.

The participants' attendance was recorded each week. The NLRC interns called every student who was enrolled the day before class to remind them about coming to class and to see if they need any transportation assistance. Therefore, even if students did not physically attend class that week, they did have contact with program staff who could provide support and resources during these phone calls. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when we suspended in-person activities and classes, the Sabiduría students were called every week to check in on their health and well-being.

Sabiduría began October 2017 and, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, concluded program delivery in March 2020. The NLRC outreach team continued to stay connected with the elders in Sabiduría during the pandemic but holding a virtual program was not feasible due to limited wifi, lack of equipment, and lack of technological support for the participants. Additionally, many of the students had significant shifts in their lives, such as loss of income, children living with them, and grandchildren at

Table 1: Elements of Well-Being Corresponding with Cultivando Sabiduría

The Safety of Participants *Comfortable and reliable space for class. Well-trained staff able to accommodate physical mobility, communication, and/or socio-emotional needs.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Security, Self-Identity.   Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Social Participation.
An Affirming Self-Identity *Teaching in Spanish. Drawing on students' strengths and wisdom. Using culturally relevant materials. Going on fieldtrips connecting to students' lives and experiences.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Relevance.   Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Emotional Security, Social Participation and Reciprocity.
Educational Growth *Using a popular education approach to teach civic education, literacy, and technology. Asking participants to use their talents and passions to teach others. Research assistants and staff becoming "learners" through the students' contributions and sharing of expertise.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Self-Identity, Relevance, Social Participation. Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Security.
A Few Relevant and Manageable Goals *Activities conducted in each class that are doable and can be completed within the time period. Tracking progress in literacy classes with positive affirmation. Noting incremental and significant progress in technology and crafting classes.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Relevance, Social Participation. Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Security.
Use of Technologies *Introducing features on technological devices to connect students to others, news, and social issues important to them. Practicing technology use with helpers who speak Spanish.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Relevance. Secondary. Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Security.
The Feeling of Usefulness (Connectedness) *Group work. Potlucks. Peer teaching. Celebrations. Leadership development.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Relevance, Independence.   Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Companionship, Security, Social and Civic Participation.
Adaptive Responses and Flexibility *Validating personal history, physical activities, classes rotating activities, and field trips.*
Primary Needs Fulfilled: Independence, Security.   Secondary Needs Fulfilled: Relevance, Self-Identity.

home while parents worked. While the students wanted to return to in-person activities, given the health concerns and high risk, the program could not resume in this modality.

Data Collection

Our program utilized a variety of research methods to aid in program evaluation and assessment. Through the duration of the program, 2017-2020, we administered surveys and engaged in a series of participatory qualitative methods, such as ethnography, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, oral histories, photo-elicitation interviews, and auto-ethnography. In this paper, results from our survey on civic engagement and semi-structured interviews with program participants are focused on. IRB approval was sought and granted for all data collection activities.

Civic Engagement Survey

We assessed four categories in an extensive survey that was conducted in person, one-on-one with the student and a research assistant. The ***civic knowledge and attitudes section*** helped us compute a profile of participants' perceptions of civic engagement including personal beliefs about civic engagement, opinions of elected officials and government, government concern for people, government accountability, and trust in government. The ***civic participation section*** includes indicators from a national sample to reflect civic actions compared to national trends. It measures civic values, motives, and behaviors. ***Civic indicators*** include questions about community problem solving, volunteering group membership, and participation in charitable causes; electoral indicators include voter registration, voting, and involvement in political campaigns; and indicators of political voice including contact with public officials, contact with news, participation in protests, signing petitions, and canvassing. The ***health and wellness section*** measured elders' mobility, self-reported health, ability to conduct everyday tasks, and traditionalism. We also included *qualitative open-ended questions* in the survey to allow participants to describe other local civic events that emerged unique to their regional location.

Trained bilingual/bicultural research assistants from the National Latino Research Center followed strict protocols to administer the questionnaire and to pay close attention in the interview so that the participants could engage in the survey at their own pace. Each participant was compensated for completing assessments according to the following schedule: $20 at baseline (T1) and $20 after attending 10 classes (T2). Data were mainly collected in person. The survey sample included 73 elders who completed the baseline (T1) surveys and 68 who completed the follow-up T2 surveys.

In-Depth Qualitative Interviews

This project was fortunate to include Noemi Jara, then a sociology graduate student, who focused her thesis on the "third age" life stage for working-class, Mexican immigrant women. In Mexican culture, elders are referred as being in their "third age" or "*tercera edad*," which is considered an important life stage for transitions related to increased life changes that occur with aging (e.g., physical and health changes, spousal caretaking, widowhood). Jara was a long-time volunteer for the NLRC, and three of the authors in this paper served on her thesis committee. Specifically, she explored how Mexican immigrant women give meaning to their experiences and life circumstances, and how they respond to economic disadvantage in older age. Jara (2019) conducted in-depth interviews, and six (6) were *Cultivando Sabiduría* students. We have permission to share the excerpts of these interviews and analysis.

The interviews were "elder-centered" and "elder-driven." Participants offered responses to questions concerned with what is meaningful and relevant to them in older age, and the pacing or direction of the interviews was led by their unique insights. Semi-structured interviews allowed for verbal expression, emotional response, and organic intellectual exchange between the researcher and the participants of this study. Jara (ibid) explained that her role as researcher/ interviewer was to ask questions, then listen, observe, and be embedded in the dissemination of knowledge by participants.

The following prompt questions were used to guide the conversational-style interviews with the elder women: 1) What is important to you in life? 2) How do you per-

ceive your health and well-being? 3) How do you spend your time (prompt: daily routines, responsibilities, hobbies)? 4) What roles do you hold in your immediate environment (prompt: roles in the home)? 5) What activities do you participate in in the vicinity of your neighborhood or community (prompt: helping others, volunteering, recreational or cultural activities)? 6) What are things that are challenging for you these days? 7) How do you cope with those challenges (prompt: faith and/or religious practice, support groups)?

Jara's sample is highly representative of the participants in the *Cultivando Sabiduría* program, the majority of which were working-class women of Mexican origin. Therefore, the interviews offer significant contributions to our understanding of how the program impacts elders.

Results

Civically Engaged

We present descriptive statistics based on surveys that were administered before the students enrolled in the class (pre-test or T1) and the second survey which they took after attending class 8 to 10 times (post-test or T2). We found positive impacts of the curriculum and related activities on the knowledge of and participation in various forms of civic engagement.

Knowledge of politics or public affairs

Most participants reported similar rates of "I know a little" or "I don't know much" about politics and public affairs nationally, statewide, and locally. At baseline (T1), most participants reported very little knowledge of local, statewide, and national issues. When we asked them to report again during follow-up (T2), the rates of knowledge increased slightly. More participants reported knowing a little about local politics at T2, an increase of 19 percent. Similarly, there was a 10 percent increase in their knowledge of statewide politics, but only a 4 percent increase of national politics. It appears that participants become more well informed about local and state public affairs after participating in *Cultivando Sabiduría*.

Concerns for Latino communities

We asked participants to reflect on "the most challenging problems facing Latinos in the U.S. today, in your city, and in the country." Racism, discrimination, injustices, unfair treatment, and human rights violations were some of the overarching concerns reported. However, participants provided responses that could be categorized in three main themes: immigration concerns, education needs, and economic and infrastructure improvements. Table 2 below describes the responses in each theme.

Table 2: Responses about the Most Challenging Problems for Latino Communities

Most Challenging Problems for Latino Communities
Immigration: Fear of being racially profiled by law enforcement and immigration enforcement. ICE Raids. Checkpoints. Deportations. Family separations.
Education & Awareness: Lack of information about the community. Language barriers. Lack of professional preparation.
Economy & Infrastructure: Lack of jobs and unemployment. Lack of well-paying jobs. Income is very low. Employment discrimination. High cost of rents and lack of affordable housing. Homelessness. Lack of school transportation. Maintenance of the streets so they are clean and safe. Roads are in disrepair. Lack of affordable and free services. Violence in the community. Disconnected communities. Too many fires in our environment. Lack of representation in local government.

Trust in government

When we asked participants to reflect on their level of trust in government and government officials, we found that at baseline (T1) before they participated in the program, only 11 percent felt they could trust the government to do what is right, compared to 21 percent at T2 or after they participated in the program. This is a rather low level of trust in the government, and the next results on volunteering indicate their commitment to contributing to solutions for community issues.

Volunteering patterns

More than half of the participants had never volunteered in their lives. However, of those who had volunteered, 30 percent had done so within the last 12 months. When we asked again at T2, the rate of volunteering in the last 12 months increased to 32 percent. Students in *Sabiduría* continued their levels of volunteering through their participation in the program. Most participants who volunteered conducted their service in places they frequented such as schools, churches, and community centers and clinics. In schools, participants assisted teachers in the classroom, read to children, supported during field trips, coordinated school events, and invited parents to attend parent meetings. At churches, they held study groups and provided childcare. In the community, they fed the homeless, promoted health (*promotora de salud*), conducted presentations to inform the community, prepared emergency kits, distributed food in mobile pantries, conducted canvassing and phone banking, and collected trash at the local beaches with grandchildren. Many participants cited Universidad Popular[2] as the community center in which they preferred to conduct their volunteer work.

Participants also had a chance to volunteer their time to teach in the *Cultivando Sabiduría* program, teaching peers (elders) to knit and make jewelry or bringing food to feed elders. Some elders began teaching adults about U.S. civics and government in other community programs led by the NLRC.

At the start of their involvement with *Sabiduría*, participants reported that the most important motivators for volunteering were a desire to help others, help to make their communities a better place, and learn a new skill. 70 percent of participants felt that the best way to support organizations was by volunteering, and the top reason to become a volunteer was to help others (44%). But at follow-up, 85 percent cited "a desire to help others," an increase of 31 percent from T1.

For those participants who had not previously volunteered, significant barriers existed that hindered their opportunities to engage. At baseline, only 51 percent reported limited English as a barrier, but 71 percent reported it as a barrier in T2. We believe that exposure to different forms of traditional civic engagement through the curriculum resulted in them realizing the importance of learning English.

Political engagement

We asked participants questions related to traditional forms of civic engagement, specifically related to voting and electoral processes. 26 participants were registered to vote (of 31 eligible), 84% at T1 and 91% at T2. Most registered voters voted in national and local elections and had voted in the last election cycle (about 75%).

Although the rates of other types of political engagement were not very high among *Sabiduría* students, there were *slight increases* from T1 to T2 in this type of engagement that are noteworthy. See Table 3 for summaries of increases in traditional forms of civic engagement.

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2   As noted in Nuñez-Alvarez et al. (2018), the NLRC delivered Universidad Popular (The People's University) which is a comprehensive curriculum for Spanish-speaking families in San Diego County focusing on increasing knowledge of the U.S. educational system, health, environment, civic participation, and economic development among immigrant and underserved populations with limited literacy.

Table 3: Summary of Where Students Increased Traditional Forms of Civic Engagement

Type	T1	T2	Difference
Volunteered in a political campaign	8%	13%	increase of 5 percent
Contacted public officials to express their concerns	11%	17%	increase of 6 percent
Worked as canvassers	8%	13%	increase of 5 percent
Refused to buy from companies because they disagreed with the social or political values of the company	15%	25%	increase of 10 percent
Supported companies because they approved of its social and political values	20%	26%	increase of 6 percent
Gave testimony at a community forum or city council meeting to express their concerns about a community issue	15%	22%	increase of 7 percent

The data shared above indicate that a culturally and linguistically relevant curriculum that offers free classes in the heart of communities does make an impact on the civic lives of Latinx elders. Because they participated in a previous civic engagement and leadership development program, there was not a significant increase. However, we identified continued rates of volunteering and their deep desire to serve and improve their community. The traditional forms of civic engagement were not initially as strong, but small increases indicate the potential of a strong impact with more participation in classes and related activities. While *Cultivando Sabiduría* was focused on honoring and further igniting the civic engagement of Latinx elders, we also discovered that the classes themselves created a sense of belonging among participants, and they developed an identity of being "students," which had long been held out of their reach.

Inclusion and Belonging

All the participants referred to the program as "their class" and identified themselves as "students." They came to *Cultivando Sabiduría* with low levels of formal education. Mexican immigrant elders have some of the lowest literacy levels due in part to their limited access to formal schooling in their home country (Krause et al. 2011). Elders in *Cultivando Sabiduría* reported working in Mexico as children and adolescents and so being unable to attend school. Now, they were finally able to become students. The in-depth qualitative interviews highlighted the participants' deep satisfaction about fulfilling a life-long dream of becoming a student.

For example, Doña Arnulfa never attended school in Mexico; she had no formal education. Forming part of an elder program has been her respite relief. She explained that she was able to leave her husband for 2-3 hours on Thursday mornings to form a community with other elder women attending the program. She drew strength from being part of that network and learned from her peers' new art forms (e.g., knitting and beading).

Doña Alicia's participation in an elder program changed her life in positive ways. She reported learning how to write in the program. Doña Alicia shared:

> *"Estoy aprendiendo a leer y a escribir otra vez. Eso me hace sentir bien como nunca fui a la escuela. Me siento contenta ahí, seguir estudiando. No importa mi edad, porque yo quiero salir adelante. Para darle un*

ejemplo también a los hijos y a los nietos, que uno no se rinde." ["I am learning to read and write all over again. I feel like I never even went to school. I feel content there to continue my studies. It does not matter my age, because I want to get ahead in life. I want to be a good example for my children and grandchildren that they should never give up."]

Doña Petra commented that participating in an elder program enabled her to learn new things. She also enjoyed it as a distraction away from her responsibilities at home. Given participants' intensive spousal and/or family commitments, *Cultivando Sabiduría* offers a crucial respite from caretaking.

About how she felt about being part of the program, Doña Berta stated:

"Me hace feliz convivir con los demás, con mis amistades, con mis compañeros…Me hace feliz cantar, bailar, platicar, sonreír, abrazar. Soy muy sensible pero dentro de mi sensibilidad, le sonrio al dia, a la vida, a la amiga, al vecino, al compañero." ["I am very happy to be with everyone else, with my friends, with the people I know in class. I feel happy to sing, dance, converse, smile and give hugs. I am very level-headed but I smile at the day, at life, at a friend, at a neighbor, at others in class."]

Doña Berta was still working, but on the days when she had a cancellation or was able to get off of work, she enjoyed being with her fellow students. She elaborated:

"Los días que trabajo, que son de ocho horas pero por X razón o causa me cancelan o hago lo que tenga que hacer para dejar un tiempo para mi grupo de tejido donde convivo con mis compañeras, donde intercambiamos puntadas de tejido, donde les he enseñado un poco. He aprendido de ellas también. Donde vamos y desayunamos, donde vamos a tomar alguna orientación sobre la salud…Siempre se nos habla de algo… Programas que hay en la comunidad y en la clínica (de salud comunitaria). Hay viajes. Tambien salimos y también nos divertimos." ["The days that I work, which is 8 hours, but because of whatever reason they cancel my shift or I finish up what I have to do and come to class for my knitting group to be with my classmates where we exchange ideas for knitting and where I teach them, too. I have

learned from them as well. It's where we go and have breakfast, where we go to programs related to our health. They are always sharing things with us, like what programs are available to us at the community clinic. There are also trips. We go out and we have fun."]

Cultivando Sabiduría has also connected participants to opportunities for leadership. Doña Carmen feels proud to take classes and also become a trained promotora. She explained:

"Me siento muy muy orgullosa y para que sepan mis hijas que no tuve escuela pero ahora de mis 79 años lo logró lo que me propongo. Me encanta ser promotora de EMASS porque aprendo y ayudo a mi comunidad." ["I am very proud and for my daughters to know that I did not have any schooling but at 79 years old I am achieving my goals that I set out for myself. I love being a promotora for EMASS because I am learning and I am helping my community."]

Additionally, the elders found and made community outside of the formal programs. For example, Doña Toña spent her time beading, knitting, and teaching women in her trailer park community her art forms. In addition to *Cultivando Sabiduría,* she discovered other community programs geared toward elders on Tuesdays and Fridays. She enjoys being around people of her same age. She describes feeling comfortable around them when she says, *"Me siento agusto."*

For Doña Berta, being active socially connects to her well-being, which gave her a spiritual boost and positive energy.

"Hago que me sienta contenta porque siento que tengo armonía y bienestar emocionalmente, espiritualmente. Económicamente, es algo de lo que no me hace tan feliz… Me hace feliz lo más sencillo. No se, un dia de ir con una amiga a comer, de ir a un convivio donde me sienta feliz, donde pueda sonreir, platicar, expresar lo que yo siento, es lo que me hace feliz. La convivencia con los demás." ["I do what makes me happy because I feel like I have harmony and emotional well-being, spiritually. Financially, this is something that I don't feel happy about. I am happier living more simply. I don't know, one day

go out to eat with my friend, go to a gathering where I feel happy where I can smile, converse with others, and express myself, that is what makes me feel happy. I like to be around others."]

Doña Magdalena also commented on how important it was to spend time with her peers. She reported:

"A veces nos, 'Oh yo compré esto, mira. Te voy a dar.' Así nos convivamos. Un bocadito de comida, fruta. Salimos a comer. Salimos a un desayuno. Es bonito." ["At times someone says, 'Oh, I bought this, come take a look. I want to give it to you.' That is how we are together. A few bites of food, of fruit. We eat together. We are treated to a breakfast. It's nice."]

Doña Carmen described an active social life focused on the service of others, such as friends in the hospital. She shared:

"No trabajo, pero me gusta ayudar a personas que necesitan. Por ejemplo, ir al hospital a visitar personas que conozco o a sus casas a ayudarles en lo que puedo y por trabajar no. Pero también es un trabajo pero de voluntad y de mi corazón." ["I don't work but I like to help other people who need help. For example, I go to the hospital to visit people I know or go to their houses to help them as much as I can but not for a job. It is work but it's volunteer and from my heart."]

Overall, the women in this study found satisfaction in connecting with others but also doing so with a purpose. Each participant in the study was engaged in volunteer work—mainly consisting of informal, helpful activities related to neighbors and friends. Their participation in the community programs represented their desire to fulfill lifelong dreams of education. They also had skills, such as knitting, that they could share with others.

Conclusion

Cultivando Sabiduría responded to the needs of elders and of the community. Students shared wisdom among themselves, and they learned skills that they identified as useful, meaningful, and important to their health, daily activities, and civic life.

The baseline portrait of Latinx elders defies the generalized research findings that Latinxs are less likely to be civically engaged. When we asked Latinxs elders about community volunteering, we began to see the vibrant activities that lead to stronger neighborhoods and schools. Our findings result in actionable and evidence-based strategies that lead to an increased understanding of political underrepresentation and pathways for civic engaged elderly Latinxs.

Karyne Jones, director of the National Caucus and Center on Black Aging, shared that her parents nurtured in her an ethos of caring, compassion, concern for community, and giving back (Senior Corps 2018). She referred to the cultural wealth developed in her family, and that carried on into her civic participation. Similarly, we see that a majority of Latinx elders in this study indicated that they volunteer because they want to help others. They care about their community. The elders draw from their cultural and life experiences to contribute their skills, passions, and wisdom. Supported by a linguistically and culturally relevant curriculum, the Latinx elders in our study had life experiences that are seen as crucial assets to build upon, and they emerged as leaders in their communities and in our region.

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