

**Commencement Address
Chican@ and Latin@ Studies Program
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

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I am honored to give the keynote address at your graduation ceremony today, and am blessed to be able to share this important day with you.

Today, we recognize that each of you has devoted a significant portion of your college career to studying Latinas and Latinos in the United States—our histories, our cultures, our politics, our communities, our literature and music and art, and our educational and workforce and healthcare experiences. You have also examined our interactions with other minoritized people as well as our relationship to the ever-shrinking majority. Along with your major field of study, your Certificate in Chican@ and Latin@ Studies equips you to understand and advance the interests of the ever-growing U.S. population of Mexican, Central American, Caribbean, and South American origin and descent. You couldn't be taking this expertise into the world at a better time: in the very years when you were pursuing your degrees, Latinos became for the first time the largest U.S. minority group. And you couldn't have gained this expertise in a more important place: while Anglo Americans constitute the majority in every region of the nation, nowhere is that majority larger than in the Midwest. Here in the Badger State, despite the rapid influx of Latinos, it's easier for non-Latinos to remain ignorant of our presence, at best, and hostile to it, at worst, diminishing our life chances and our sense of belonging.

What you've learned about Latinas and Latinos right here in Wisconsin's capital couldn't be more crucial. When I joined the faculty at UW in 2001, a faculty colleague told me that there were hardly any Latinos living in Wisconsin and that because of this, the field of Latino studies was of no account—this despite the presence of 140,000 Latinos in the state. In the ten years that followed his pronouncement, Wisconsin's Latino population grew by 74 percent, to 340,000. I wish he were in this room right now and had to contemplate the educational choices a dozen of you have made, not to mention the 150 other UW graduates who have made the same choice over the past decade by completing a certificate in Chican@ and Latin@ Studies. Likewise, since I arrived in Madison, I have heard ethnic studies more generally denigrated as “me studies”—that is, the study of particular ethnic groups exclusively by members of those ethnic groups. I wish all such detractors had to contemplate the list of UW graduates who have earned CLS certificates in the past ten years, since nearly one-third of those students have been non-Latino; they have been Anglo American, African American, American Indian, Arab American, Jewish American, and of mixed racial and ethnic heritage.

That I'm promoting the pursuit of Chican@ and Latin@ Studies at a place like UW-Madison and applauding those of you who have followed that pursuit is an odd twist of fate. I grew up in New Mexico, long the state with the largest percentage of Latinos in the nation. It's been big news this spring that California has reached the demographic tipping point, with Latinos outnumbering white, non-Latinos there for the first time since the nineteenth century—39 percent of Californians are now Latino, and just under 39 percent are Anglo. That kind of news produces a big yawn

in my home state, where Latinos constitute a whopping 47 percent of the population; Anglos lag well behind at under 40 percent. And New Mexico's demography reminds us of both the historical depth and contemporary diversity of U.S. *latinidad*; like me, a majority of Latinas and Latinos there trace their roots back 15 or 20 generations, when *nuevomexico* was New Spain's northern frontier, a frontier controlled not so much by Spanish colonists, but by the Indigenous peoples who lived in settled villages and mobile communities all around the Spanish colonies. Spain tried to conquer those peoples, but more often had to settle for an uneasy coexistence and the eventual emergence of the kind of *mestizaje* that appeared almost everywhere the Spanish went in the New World. My own New Mexico-based ancestry is Spanish and Apache, and when my non-New Mexican ancestors belatedly arrived in New Mexico in the nineteenth century from France and Germany and New England, they had to accommodate themselves to the *hispano* world that had emerged there; they had to marry into the culture in order to survive. In the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, however, that old, deeply rooted *hispano* population has been enriched by a new influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, restoring to New Mexico a Latino majority that had diminished after the U.S. conquest in 1848. How strange, then, for me to end up in a place like Wisconsin, where the Latino population, relatively speaking, is so new—just a century in the making.

Still, along with the differences between Wisconsin and New Mexico, there are also similarities, and those similarities remind us of the broader circumstances Latinos face in the U.S. and thus why it's so important that you chose to earn a

certificate in Chican@ and Latin@ Studies. In Wisconsin and New Mexico, as throughout the U.S., the Latino population is growing, augmented by both immigration and birth, but increasingly more by birth than immigration. That population is still disproportionately of Mexican origin, but a rapid increase in immigration from Central America—especially from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has diversified the Latino population in both Wisconsin and New Mexico and throughout the U.S., even in places with large Puerto Rican and Cuban communities, like New York and Florida. In Wisconsin and New Mexico, as throughout the U.S., more than one-third of all Latinos live in poverty, compared to about a tenth of the Anglo majority. In Wisconsin and New Mexico, as throughout the U.S., far more Latinos lack health insurance than do majority Americans. By every measure, Latinas and Latinos fare more poorly in Wisconsin and New Mexico, as they do elsewhere in the U.S. That is why your commitment to Latino studies matters; armed with what you've learned in Chican@ and Latin@ Studies as well as in your major field, you are poised to make a difference, to improve the life chances and sense of belonging of all Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. You may do that as an educator, as an engineer, as a chemist, as a business owner, as a nurse or doctor or lawyer, as filmmaker or novelist, as a politician, as a journalist, or, after pursuing an advanced degree, as an academic in any number of fields—from economics to psychology, from art history to food science, from language studies to ethnic studies. There is no realm of contemporary life where your newfound knowledge can't be used to the benefit of our communities and toward the cause of social and environmental justice.

But that newfound knowledge and the commitments it engenders can never be, and should never be, extracted from the profoundly relational nature of contemporary life, where Latinas and Latinos only become Latinas and Latinos in relationship to one another and to other peoples. U.S. *latinidad* encompasses an extraordinary diversity of ancestries and cultures and migrations, only some of which we routinely acknowledge and celebrate. For example, we know the history and cultural consequences for *puertorriqueños* of Spanish and African and Indigenous mixing in the Caribbean, but how often do we recognize the importation by force of 200,000 African slaves to what is now Mexico between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries? And we know that in the past decade or so, more and more immigrants have come to the U.S. from Central America, but how often do we acknowledge that many of those immigrants are from Maya or Nahua communities, and some do not speak Spanish, let alone English, but rather an indigenous language? And we know that family reunification has been a primary goal for generations of Mexican immigrants, but how often do we recognize the added burden placed on families created by same-sex couples or on immigrants estranged from their kin because of their sexual orientation or gender self-presentation? These questions only begin to touch on the diversity within Latino communities and the cultural hierarchies and differences of power that attend that diversity, but they are among the questions one must ask and answer if one means to embark on a lifetime of advocacy on behalf of Latinas and Latinos.

But there is more than this, because the circumstances of Latino life in the U.S. are inextricably bound up in a complex national and global political economy

that demands a broader vision. We can advocate all we like for the interests of ethnic Mexican and Cuban and Puerto Rican and Guatemalan communities, but if we don't take into account the structures of capitalism that shape African American and Afro-Caribbean and Vietnamese and Hmong and Ojibwe and Lakota and poor white communities in both similar and different ways, we'll make limited political headway in our lifetimes. And we will deny ourselves crucial allies in the struggle for a more just world, a world where more people are more able to determine the contours of their own existence on this earth—where voting rights are not restricted but rather guaranteed; where national borders are not theaters of war; where love is legible as love no matter who the lovers are; where disease and wellness aren't indexed by race and class; where fewer people of color spend much of their lives in prison; where safe and meaningful work at a living wage is in reach for all. So take what you have learned in Chican@ and Latin@ Studies, and breathe life into the world around you. *¡Sí, se puede!*