

Celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month: SPHTM faculty foster innovation and inclusivity

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The [Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine](#) nurtures a spirit of innovation and inclusivity by employing diverse faculty. It's one of the school's greatest strengths.

Hispanic Heritage Month is recognized in the United States from Sept. 15 through Oct. 15, which provides an opportunity to celebrate faculty from a Hispanic heritage or Latina background. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of the holiday is the celebration of diversity, since the terms "Hispanic" or "Latin" reflect a wide array of countries

and cultures.

[Dr. Tatiane Santos](#), assistant professor of Health Policy and Management, hails from Brazil originally, identifies as Latin American, and she understands and embraces the idea of different cultures coming together in celebration.

“There is so much overlap in Brazilian and Hispanic culture, music, arts, personality, and texture. I think that our communities find comfort in the fact that, on average, we experience a lot of the same challenges in the US,” Santos said. “My Brazilian identity has always been strong. I carry it with the ‘weight’ of representing my people in a positive and constructive way.”

Almost universally, the faculty interviewed spoke of bringing their backgrounds into their teaching, with those backgrounds often benefiting their ability to communicate with their students and teach them.

[Dr. Martha Silva](#), assistant professor in International Health and Sustainable Development, was raised in Mexico and Venezuela and has been conducting research in reproductive health and rights in Latin American countries on and off throughout the past two decades. She considers her experiences a teaching opportunity for current international students.

“I have a soft spot in my heart for all international students since I was one myself,” Silva said. “I know what it's like to leave home, adapt to a new cultural setting and learn to work under a different set of rules than what I was used to.”

Epidemiology Associate Professor [Astrid Engel](#) who hails from Costa Rica, agreed. “Being a foreigner in United States and coming here as a student with two bags carrying all my belongings helps me connect with many students. Also, there are many anecdotes from my time in Costa Rica that I use to illustrate some of the concepts that I am teaching. Many Hispanic students feel more comfortable to approach me once they found out that I speak Spanish.”

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– Dr. Berlin Londoño-Renteria

The opportunity to connect with students from a similar background and guide them through potential pitfalls is an exciting one. Connecting with students who come from *different* backgrounds, however, might be even more important.

A self-described Afro-Latina from the Pacific Coast of Colombia, [Dr. Berlin Londoño-Renteria](#) works with mosquito-borne diseases in her home country near the Venezuela border as an assistant professor of tropical medicine and infectious disease (TRMD).

“I am black, Latina, and a woman, meaning I belong to several underrepresented groups in science,” she said. “I understand how diversity impacts your perspective on your work, so I try to engage my students with activities that will introduce them to different cultures and ways of doing science. I have worked in at least three different universities, but I can say that Tulane makes me feel like I am part of something greater, something impactful, and I want my students to feel the same.”

Different backgrounds lead to different lessons – whether those lessons are large or small. Several faculty experienced difficulty in getting to where they are, and that difficulty informs their work today.

Citing financial difficulties as a major factor in her delaying parts of her education and career, Santos finds fulfillment in the type of work she now does. “There are many ways in which these experiences shape my life, work, and research. Importantly, it’s not specific to immigrant populations. It’s broader. And I am happy that I have produced, and will continue to produce, academic work that reflects my commitment to improving the well-being of more vulnerable individuals.”

“There was a point in my childhood when we were undocumented, and I never had health insurance until I went to college,” said [Dr. Eva Silvestre](#), associate professor of international health and sustainable development (IHSD), who was [recently named associate dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#). “All of these factors are important in understanding barriers to health care.”

TRMD Associate Professor [Dr. Valerie Paz-Soldan](#) directs the Tulane Health Office for Latin America, located in her home country of Peru. She grew up during a

particularly difficult time in the country's recent history, through the leftist military dictatorships of the 1970s and the terrorist years of the 1980s.

"Throughout my childhood and adolescence, it was very common to hear and sometimes feel the power of bombs and experience power outages and power, food, or supply shortages," she recalled.

She described a situation where her roommate, who was from California, asked to borrow some shampoo. "I directed her to my closet where, to her surprise, she found three or four bottles of shampoo and large stocks of numerous toiletries." When her roommate asked why she kept so many items stocked, Paz-Soldan replied, "Well, what if they run out in the store?" Despite her roommate's attempts to explain that it would be impossible for items to run out in every store, after being raised with constant shortages, Paz-Soldan could not so easily let go of the idea of 'buying-and-storing' as a necessity. "I no longer do that," she says, "but when living in Louisiana, I took a picture of the store shelves before a hurricane to prove that sometimes, stores do run out!"

Miscommunication may occur, but the opportunity to learn from and teach others continues to drive several faculty members. [Dr. Arachu Castro](#), Stone Endowed Chair of Public Health in Latin America, was born and raised in Spain then earned the first of two doctoral degrees in France. Her European background coupled with a love of travel turned her attention toward Latin America, where she continues to bring her global experience and perspective to her teaching in IHSD.

"I conduct all my research in Latin America," Castro said. "I became fascinated with the region when I first visited as a student. People frequently get confused and think that I'm a Latina. I have learned about Latin America through its history and literature and during my extensive travels throughout most of the region. As a medical anthropologist trained in public health, my major interests are how social inequalities are embodied as differential risk for pathologies common among the poor and how health policies may alter the course of epidemic disease and other pathologies afflicting populations living in poverty."

The School of Public Health's own dean, [Dr. Thomas A. LaVeist](#), is first generation born in the United States. LaVeist's mother immigrated from the Dominican Republic as a young woman and married his father who had recently immigrated from Saint Martin.

Noting that his Hispanic heritage has played a role in some of his research, LaVeist is hopeful that as students learn of his cultural heritage as Black and Hispanic and a first generation college student, they will see that they are limited only by their imagination.

“One study I conducted was a study of the Black Hispanic (Afro-Latino) community. I titled that study ‘Are Black Hispanics, Black or Hispanic...’ This study sought to determine if Black Hispanics could be best reached by culturally tailored interventions to black Americans or if they would be more responsive to interventions designed for the broader Hispanic community. That study found that Black Hispanics' health behaviors (alcohol use, smoking, diet, and exercise) resembled white Hispanics. For health services utilization they resembled non-Hispanic blacks. However, their health status was influenced by both race and ethnicity, with black Hispanics resembling both white Hispanic and non-Hispanic black people depending upon the specific health issue.”

“We concluded that health behavior interventions incorporating knowledge of Hispanic cultures may be sufficient to reach black Hispanics,” LaVeist added. “However, health services or health status, interventions targeted broadly to Hispanic people may not be sufficient. In some respects, black Hispanic people comprise a distinct subgroup that may require targeted attention in public health interventions.”

Other faculty with Latin backgrounds have connected their culture and research. For example, SBPS Associate Professor [Dr. Melissa Fuster](#) has sought to understand the contextual factors related to diet-related inequalities in Latin American communities, most extensively in her book, [Caribeños at the Table: How migration, health and race intersect in New York City](#). The work was driven by her own experience as a Puerto Rican in the United States, and the negative indicators she saw on the mainland as well as the rise in diet-related conditions in Puerto Rico.

[Dr. Melissa Gonzales](#), chair of the Department of Environmental Health Sciences, has a research portfolio that includes the Albuquerque Hispanic Moms Study and the UNM-UTEP ARCH study of asthma and air pollution among children living on the U.S. Mexico border. She has also conducted research involving indigenous populations in the Southwest.

TRMD Assistant Professor [Claudia Herrera](#) received degrees from both Colombia and Spain, and now conducts much of her studies on Chagas disease, which is endemic in rural areas of Mexico and much of Central and South America.

Also from TRMD, Associate Professor [Patricia Scaraffia](#), who earned her PhD in Argentina, uses her expertise in insect metabolism to address malaria, which is a threat across the Global South.

It's clear that Hispanic heritage and Latin culture impact both the classroom and research - and both Tulane SPHTM and the public health community at large reap benefits from such a diverse faculty.