

The Strength of Multiplicity

Developing Cultural Awareness Through the Hispanic Community

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As per the US Census, by 2060, the U.S. Hispanic/Latino population is projected to reach 111 million people, accounting for 27.5% of the national population (Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong 2020, 7). In 2025, the community accounted for nearly one in five residents and was the single largest contributor to U.S. population growth over the previous decade (Piña and Martinez 2025). These numbers reveal not simply demographic change but also a seismic shift in education, society, and the church. Hispanic communities are no longer a “minority” on the margins; they are central to the fabric of the United States’ future.

Despite this growth, many lifelong learning programs in the United States, particularly in accredited theological and faith-based institutions, continue to operate with a one-size-fits-all model. Curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices often assume monolingualism or Euro-American norms as the default, unintentionally excluding those whose lived experiences, languages, and worldviews are shaped by cultures other than their own. This approach not only diminishes the learning experience for multicultural participants, particularly in

light of this chapter's focus on Hispanics, but also weakens the institution by missing opportunities to leverage multiplicity as a strength. Cultural awareness is not optional but essential for education in the twenty-first century and beyond.

At its heart, cultural awareness is an act of hospitality. Genuine hospitality does not force the guest to conform to the host but creates free space where individuals may discover themselves, their gifts, and their calling (Nouwen 1975, 51). Applied to lifelong learning, this means creating classrooms, campuses, and programs where Hispanics are not outsiders adapting to imposed Euro-American norms but rather full participants shaping the learning environment with their voices, histories, and spiritual traditions. A culturally aware lifelong learning program is not merely about translation, marketing, or vague celebrations; it is about creating structures, curricula, and communities that affirm the dignity, identity, and belonging of Hispanic learners across generations. Educators, administrators, ministry leaders, and lifelong learners must recognize that serving Hispanic participants requires intentionality, humility, and a commitment to transformation.

This chapter provides a panoramic understanding of Hispanic/Latino realities and three strategies for transforming institutions of lifelong learning into culturally aware environments: 1) Enhancing cultural awareness and institutional commitment as part of the *imago Dei*; 2) Developing inclusive strategies at all levels of programming; and 3) Embedding inclusivity into curriculum, faculty, and staff development. Through these strategic lenses, educators can gain practical tools for fostering academic success, engagement, and a sense of belonging among Hispanic/Latino lifelong learners, enabling institutions to move beyond surface-level inclusion toward systemic transformation.

Understanding Hispanic/Latino Realities

Before implementing shared strategies, lifelong learning directors and administrators must understand Hispanic realities. To serve Hispanic/Latino learners effectively, educators must begin by acknowledging the diversity and complexity of Hispanic identity. Too often, institutions approach this community assuming that shared language or broad cultural markers mean shared experiences. In reality, Hispanic/Latino identity encompasses multiple generations, national origins,

linguistic realities, and cultural traditions, all of which shape the learning experience.

The story of the Hispanic community in the United States is one of steady growth, resilience, and transformation. Between 2015 and 2025, no group contributed more to U.S. population growth than Hispanics, shaping the cultural, social, and educational landscape in profound ways (Krogstad 2020; Piña and Martinez 2025). Once considered a “minority” presence, Hispanics have become a defining force, not only in numbers but also in influence. This trend tells us something important: the future of education in the United States, including lifelong learning for ministry, cannot be imagined apart from the Hispanic community. Institutions that prepare now, by becoming culturally aware, inclusive, and responsive, will not only serve Hispanic participants well but also secure their own relevance and vitality in the decades to come, facilitating swift integration of generational differences.

Each generation brings unique strengths and challenges. First-generation Hispanics often maintain strong linguistic and cultural ties to their country of origin. They may face challenges with English proficiency and educational systems unfamiliar to their families. Thus, first-generation learners may possess resilience and a deep respect for authority, but they often struggle with systemic barriers. In contrast, second-generation Hispanics, who are U.S.-born children of immigrants, typically navigate bicultural realities, being fluent in English while still retaining cultural practices from their parents. Thus, second-generation students often act as cultural bridges, interpreting for parents while navigating American norms. Additionally, third-generation Hispanics may be fully assimilated linguistically while still valuing traditions, faith, and community ties passed down through their family. Thus, third-generation students may wrestle with questions of identity, belonging, and cultural memory. A culturally aware program acknowledges these nuances and resists treating “Hispanics” as a single category.

Hispanic/Latino learners face persistent inequities across higher education: lower levels of degree attainment compared to peers, underrepresentation among faculty, and systemic barriers such as language access, financial precarity, and race-linked gaps in opportunity. These inequities are particularly true in theological education. As Elizabeth Conde-Frazier reminds us, making theological education accessible is not simply a matter of “opening the door” but of “beginning with the wisdom and assets of the community, not with the academy’s

assumptions about what theology should be” (Conde-Frazier 2011, 127). Access, in this sense, is not only structural but also epistemic.

Access means recognizing that Latinas/os are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theology; they are already carriers, storytellers, and producers of theology. Thus, Justo L. González insisted that the future of Christian thought in the western hemisphere will not come from the traditional centers of power but from marginalized communities themselves: “the future of theology in the United States will be shaped by those on the margins, not because they are marginalized, but because they bear the living faith of the church” (González 1990, 32). Hispanic theological lifelong learning formation is therefore not remedial; it is formative for the future itself. And so, to serve Hispanic lifelong learners and students well is not simply to correct inequity; it is to participate in the emergence of the next theological horizon.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Hispanic students is not just access but also a sense of belonging. People thrive when they feel seen, valued, and connected. For Hispanics, belonging is built through language inclusion, cultural representation, relational mentoring, and institutional practices that affirm family and community values such as *la bendición* (the practice of giving blessings within families, especially from elders to younger members, expressing care, guidance, and approval) and *el respeto* (a deep-rooted cultural value emphasizing respect for others, particularly elders, authority, and communal norms). Faith plays a central role in many Hispanic households. Church life, spirituality, and biblical authority are interwoven with cultural identity. For programs of lifelong learning for ministry, especially, this reality means that ignoring cultural context results in disconnection. When programs fail to provide a sense of belonging, students feel invisible; when programs succeed, they unlock the gifts of resilience, spirituality, and creativity that Hispanic learners bring to the classroom. Programs that understand and integrate Hispanic theology, cultural traditions, and faith practices not only affirm Hispanic identity but also enrich the whole learning community.

Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Institutional Commitment as Part of Imago Dei

The phrase *cultural awareness* is used in educational circles, but in practice, it is often misunderstood or reduced to surface-level gestures.

Too many institutions equate awareness with cultural celebrations, food fairs, or a Spanish-language flyer. While these activities may express goodwill, they do not address the deeper transformation required for lifelong learning programs to truly engage Hispanic/Latino learners. At its core, cultural awareness is about transformation, a reshaping of institutional identity, values, and practices to reflect the diversity of God's people. It is less about "including others" in a fixed model and more about reimagining the model itself so that all cultures are honored as co-creators of knowledge and formation.

It is essential to distinguish between cultural awareness and cultural competence. Awareness involves recognizing the presence, needs, and contributions of Hispanic/Latino communities. At the same time, competence requires the skills and behaviors necessary to adapt teaching methods, policies, and systems to effectively serve diverse learners. Both are essential: institutions cannot advance toward actual competence without first being aware of and acknowledging the richness and diversity that Hispanic students bring to the learning community.

The opposite is a one-size-fits-all mindset, which assumes a universal learner who conforms to dominant cultural norms, usually white, middle-class, monolingual, and Western. For Hispanic students, this approach creates barriers: curricula that exclude Latino voices and experiences, pedagogies that overlook collaborative and relational learning styles common in Hispanic cultures, and assessment methods that privilege specific ways of knowing while devaluing oral, communal, and experiential learning. This educational monologue leaves learners from Hispanic and other cultures feeling unseen and undervalued. By contrast, culturally aware programs of lifelong learning affirm students' identities, weaving their lived realities into the fabric of the learning process.

For Christian and theological institutions, cultural awareness is more than an educational necessity: it is a theological mandate. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the inclusion of all peoples into God's redemptive story. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* affirms that every human being bears God's image and deserves dignity (Gen. 1:27). Cultural diversity, then, is not accidental but part of God's design. The New Testament portrays the church as a diverse body where each member contributes uniquely to the whole (1 Cor. 12). Cultural awareness, rooted in biblical teaching, is therefore a form of discipleship and justice. It resists assimilationist pressures and instead embraces diversity as a gift of the Spirit.

Programs of lifelong learning for ministry are called to translate these theological convictions into practical action. The biblical call to hospitality, welcoming the stranger (Lev. 19:34; Heb. 13:2), challenges institutions to create environments of radical welcome, where students from all backgrounds feel valued and seen. The eschatological vision of Revelation, where “every nation, tribe, people, and language” worships together (Rev. 7:9), provides a model for institutions today: unity does not erase difference, but the Spirit weaves diversity into strength.

Practical expressions of biblical inclusion include embedding Scripture that affirms justice and equity into institutional ethos, designing chapel services and spiritual formation that integrate Hispanic worship expressions, encouraging intercultural dialogue across student groups, and rooting diversity work in discipleship rather than mere compliance. Flexibility is also essential. Many Hispanic students balance work, family, and ministry responsibilities. Evening courses, online formats, and modular intensives allow participation without forcing students to choose between education and community. When inclusion stems from these biblical convictions, it transcends trends and becomes part of the institution’s spiritual DNA. Lifelong learning programs that cultivate such awareness embody the gospel’s vision of reconciliation, hospitality, and the full flourishing of all God’s children.

Furthermore, programs that serve Hispanic learners must consider language realities. While many Hispanic students are bilingual or English-dominant, Spanish remains central to identity and family connection. Offering bilingual courses or Spanish-language tracks demonstrates cultural awareness and expands access for first-generation learners. In practice, transformation includes intentional steps such as language inclusion, offering courses, services, and communications in both Spanish and English; relational pedagogy that draws on small group dialogue, storytelling, and mentorship; equity audits to review policies, hiring, and curriculum for bias; and leadership representation that ensures Hispanic voices are part of decision-making roles. These practices go beyond merely accommodating Hispanic students: they reshape the institution itself to reflect the richness and diversity of God’s kingdom.

This work of transformation cannot be pursued in isolation. Partnerships with Hispanic-serving organizations, churches, community groups, and national associations provide wisdom, credibility, and vital connections. For example, lifelong learning programs can collaborate with Hispanic denominational networks to identify potential students, offer contextual training, and support graduates

in ministry. Such partnerships embody *comunidad* (community), a core value of Hispanic culture, reminding us that transformation is never the product of solitary effort but of shared commitment and collective vision.

Developing Inclusive Strategies at All Levels of Programming

If cultural awareness is truly transformational, institutional strategies are the mechanisms that bring it to life. For institutions of lifelong learning to serve Hispanic learners effectively, commitment must go beyond symbolic gestures to include structural change in governance, policy, and resource allocation. Cultural awareness strategies require leadership to reflect the communities they serve, ensuring that decisions are informed by those with direct experience. For example, boards that include Hispanic leaders are more likely to recognize systemic barriers and advocate for meaningful change. At the same time, advisory councils composed of students, alumni, and community partners provide critical insights into how policies affect real lives. Accountability is also essential. Institutions should track progress on Hispanic student recruitment, retention, and graduation, and communicate results transparently. Although they cannot fully capture transformation, metrics focus leadership on concrete outcomes and create a culture in which equity is an institutional priority rather than a peripheral concern.

Change begins at the top, where boards of trustees, presidents, and senior administrators set the tone for cultural awareness and inclusion. Genuine commitment requires embedding inclusiveness into mission statements, strategic plans, budget priorities and lifelong learning goals. Simply declaring diversity as a value is insufficient; institutions must dedicate resources to ensure that inclusivity is operationalized. Practical commitments may take many forms, including establishing a Cultural Awareness office or council with the authority to influence institutional decisions, allocating scholarships to support culturally diverse students, partnering with Hispanic-serving organizations and churches, and conducting regular climate surveys to assess belonging and equity. Policies and resource distribution further reflect institutional values: admissions practices that recognize bilingualism and community leadership, hiring practices that intentionally recruit

Hispanic faculty and staff, and financial aid systems designed with the economic realities of Hispanic families in mind are all concrete expressions of commitment. Resource allocation is both theological and practical, signaling what the institution truly values. Investments in translation services, cultural centers, or mentorship programs are tangible indicators that Hispanic students are recognized, supported, and central to institutional life.

When institutional strategies align with cultural awareness, the impact can be transformative. Institutions like Hispanic Summer Program (as of 2024, Hispanic Scholar Program) supported individual student persistence while also strengthening institutional outcomes; partner institutions reported an increase in Hispanic student retention, affirming the program's value for recruitment, retention, and long-term engagement (Solis-Walker et al. 2023, 19). This example illustrates that when strategies are rooted in cultural awareness, the outcomes are not only ethical but also strengthen the institution's vitality, affirming the value of Hispanic students and creating a more vibrant academic and spiritual community. Equally important is embedding inclusivity into the curriculum, faculty, and staff development.

Embedding Inclusivity into Curriculum

Curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional programs shape identity, belonging, and the sense of purpose within a community. Curriculum is often called the “hidden script” of education, because what is included, or excluded, communicates powerful messages about whose knowledge counts, who belongs, and whose voices are valued. For Hispanic learners, the curriculum is never neutral; it either reinforces marginalization or creates a sense of belonging. For Hispanic learners, a culturally aware lifelong learning curriculum communicates a powerful message: “You belong here. Your culture matters. Your faith is valid. Your leadership is needed.” Without this affirmation, students may earn degrees yet remain disconnected from the institution. With it, they are empowered to thrive, bringing resilience, creativity, and leadership to the classroom and beyond.

A culturally aware curriculum integrates Hispanic voices, histories, and contributions across all disciplines rather than confining them to a single elective or optional course. In history classes, this may include the role of Latinos in shaping U.S. political, cultural, and

religious life. In theology, it means incorporating voices such as Justo L. González, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Orlando Costas, just to mention a few. In education programs, bilingual pedagogy and multicultural strategies should be considered core content rather than supplementary material. When students encounter their culture reflected in what they are learning, they experience validation and affirmation, signaling that their identity is central rather than peripheral to both academic and spiritual life.

Effective adult learning in culturally diverse settings requires attention not only to pedagogical theory but also to the lived experiences and cultural values of learners. Hispanic learners bring rich traditions and communal practices that shape how they engage with education. Principles such as *familismo* (family-centeredness), orality through storytelling, and *respeto* influence participation, communication, and the ways knowledge is constructed in the classroom. When these culturally informed practices are considered alongside the principles of andragogy, self-direction, experiential learning, relevance, and problem-centered instruction, they illuminate pathways for creating learning environments that are both respectful of cultural identity and aligned with best practices in adult education. By examining collaborative learning, storytelling, and respect for authority in light of andragogical theory, educators can design culturally responsive instruction that fosters engagement, reflection, and meaningful knowledge construction.

For example, collaborative learning, which emphasizes group projects and peer learning, aligns with the andragogical principle that adults are self-directed and bring valuable prior experience to the learning process. Andragogy encourages participatory learning environments where learners actively construct knowledge together. The communal values of *familismo* and *cooperación* (cooperation) naturally support peer-to-peer engagement, reflecting the andragogical emphasis on social negotiation, shared problem-solving, and experiential integration.

Likewise, the use of *testimonios* (testimonies) and narratives connects learning to lived experience, which is central to adult learning theory. Andragogy posits that adults learn best when content is relevant to their personal and professional contexts and when they can integrate experience into the learning process. Storytelling validates learners' histories and promotes reflection, bridging cultural ways of knowing with the adult learning principle that learning should be problem-centered and connected to real-life applications.

Additionally, the value of *respeto*, where students may hesitate to challenge professors, presents an interesting tension with the andragogical principle that adult learners should participate actively and critically in their learning. To reconcile this tension, pedagogy can invite dialogue and reflective questioning in ways that honor respect while encouraging autonomy. For instance, small-group discussions, case studies, or anonymous contributions allow learners to exercise self-direction without directly confronting authority, thereby aligning culturally informed practices with the adult learning focus on learner engagement, autonomy, and critical thinking.

All three patterns—collaborative learning, storytelling, and respect for authority—can be harmonized with andragogical principles when instructional design is culturally responsive. They leverage adults' prior experience, promote relevance and reflection, and respect cultural norms while fostering autonomy, problem-solving, and active participation, demonstrating that culturally informed pedagogy and adult learning theory are complementary rather than contradictory.

Embedding Inclusivity into Faculty and Staff Development

No institution can become culturally aware without paying attention to its faculty and staff. They are the daily interpreters of curriculum, policies, and culture. For Hispanic learners, faculty and staff often serve as role models, mentors, and advocates. However, Hispanic faculty remain significantly underrepresented in U.S. higher education (United States Government Accountability Office 2024). The same pattern is found in theological education and Christian institutions.

Importantly, retention and advancement of Hispanic faculty require more than recruitment. Hiring Hispanic professors is only the first step; retaining them demands systemic support. Too often, Hispanic faculty experience the “minority tax,” being asked to sit on every diversity committee, mentor all Hispanic students, represent the institution in Hispanic churches and communities, and speak for Hispanic Heritage Month. While these contributions are meaningful, overtasking faculty leads to burnout and undermines their scholarly trajectory. Institutions must invest in research funding that enables publication in Hispanic studies and theology, recognize community engagement as legitimate scholarship with impact, and open intentional pathways for leadership

into roles such as department chairs, deans, and senior administration. These strategies not only retain talent; they model the inclusive leadership institutions say they want to cultivate in their students.

Representation also matters. The visual presence of Hispanic professors in the classroom communicates possibility: “If they can succeed, so can I.” Intentional recruitment must therefore be expanded beyond traditional hiring networks to include Hispanic professional associations, denominational connections, and pipelines of emerging Latina/o and Latinx scholars. Bilingualism and bicultural expertise must be understood as academic capital, not peripheral skills. And relocation support, as well as family-friendly policies, can make a critical difference in attracting candidates from diverse regions. True representation cannot be tokenistic or relegated to ethnic studies alone; Hispanic faculty belong across disciplines and across decision-making levels.

Finally, faculty and staff who are not Hispanic also shape the experience of Hispanic students. Cultural humility training is essential, not as a one-time workshop or “competency” to master but as a long-term posture of respect, curiosity, and responsiveness. This includes exploring foundational Hispanic cultural values, such as *familismo* and *respeto*; understanding the barriers experienced by many Hispanic students, including language, financial constraints, and family responsibilities; and adapting classroom practices to be more inclusive through collaborative learning, differentiated assessment, and the use of bilingual or culturally relevant resources. Cultural humility invites institutions to expand not simply their programs, but also their imagination, to make space where students can bring their whole selves and succeed on their own terms.

Conclusion

The future of education in the United States cannot be imagined without Hispanic communities. The challenge is clear: lifelong learning programs that cling to outdated models will fail to serve Hispanic learners effectively, leading to disconnection, attrition, and irrelevance. The opportunity, however, is transformative: to build programs where Hispanic students not only have access but also belong, thrive, and lead. Institutions that embrace cultural awareness at all levels, through governance, policy, resource allocation, and curriculum, do

not merely comply with educational norms; they live out the gospel's vision of hospitality, justice, and reconciliation, fostering environments where all members of the community can flourish and contribute to the transformation of church and society.

By embracing cultural awareness, institutions live out their mission to educate, disciple, and empower all of God's people. Inclusive institutional strategies involve embedding equity across governance, policy, and resource allocation to ensure that Hispanic learners are supported both structurally and symbolically. Curriculum and pedagogy should be intentionally designed to reflect Hispanic realities, integrating culturally responsive content and teaching practices that validate students' experiences and heritage. Faculty and staff development is equally critical, as leaders must be equipped to mentor, advocate, and model inclusivity in all aspects of institutional life. Undergirding all is the call to biblical inclusion: to recognize every culture as a reflection of the *imago Dei* and every learner as a vital member of Christ's body.

As lifelong learning educators, we are called to steward not only knowledge but also justice, belonging, and hope. For Hispanic learners, this means creating spaces where language, faith, and culture are celebrated as gifts. For institutions, it means moving from monologue to dialogue, from assimilation to transformation, from one-size-fits-all to *one body, many members*. Engagement and belonging are fostered by creating holistic communities rooted in faith and *familia*, where students feel seen, valued, and connected both academically and spiritually. The future is already here. The question is whether our institutions will rise to meet it.

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