

# GREAT LAKES COLLEGES ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

Funding Proposal: Faculty-Student Collaborative Project  
Oral History Mentorship Opportunity  
Project Title: "Claiming Our Place: In Search of the Latinx Presence  
on "The Hill"  
Faculty Mentor: Ric Sheffield, Prof. of Sociology & Legal Studies  
Student-principal: Alma Urbano, class of 2018  
Host Institution: Kenyon College

## Background

One consequence of the so-called contemporary civil rights movement of the 1960s was the recognition of both intentional and consequential exclusion of students from racial and ethnic minority communities from enrollment in institutions of higher learning across the country as well as implementation of strategies to admit and retain such students at public and private colleges and universities alike. Many of the nation's select institutions went far beyond the new court ordered mandates to eliminate discriminatory practices, adopting new admissions policies and embarking upon strategies designed to increase minority enrollments.

By the late nineteen sixties, colleges and universities throughout the United States had admitted their first Black students. Consistent with the political climate of the times, these students demanded increased support from college administrations in the form of curricular additions that offered opportunities to study subjects of particular importance to racial minority populations in the U.S., the hiring of faculty and staff of color, and the implementation of student affairs programs that were culturally relevant to the experiences of students who were significantly under-represented within the student body. Chief among these new programs were group-affinity organizations that began to sprout up on campuses across the nation. At Kenyon College in Ohio, the first such organization was the Black Student Union (BSU) which was founded in 1969. Beginning with the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Kenyon's BSU, periodic efforts have been made to document the organization's history including, most recently, a modest oral history project undertaken in the summer and fall of 2014.

As Kenyon College, a predominantly White liberal arts institution, has worked to become more racially and ethnically diverse, the populations of students of color have increased over the past 25 years. As the changing demographics of the nation might suggest, the representation of Latino/as students "on the Hill" and within the College's student body has grown significantly as well. Emulating the strategies pursued by their African American contemporaries nearly two decades

earlier, Latinos and Latinas at Kenyon College moved to create an affinity group and have it officially recognized by the college. In 1986, the College announced the founding of ADELANTE, the officially recognized Latino/a student association. Since that time, other students of color, international students, and students of non-Western heritage at Kenyon have formed additional identity-based organizations such as the African Students Association, South Asian Society, Middle East Students Association, Asian Society of Kenyon, Men of Color, Sisterhood, and Indigenous Nations at Kenyon among others.

Like many student organizations over the years, some of the racial, ethnic or cultural “affinity group” associations have been short-lived. As time goes by, the reasons and motivations for the founding of such groups become less clear; sometimes, few recall the origins of the groups or the issues around which much of the dialogue at meetings and events revolved. Increasingly, the need for constructing social histories of these organizations is being recognized. Fortunately, many of these groups were founded recently enough that the officers, members, and advisors could be located and contacted. As a consequence, oral histories have begun to be compiled. In the summer of 2014, a Kenyon Summer Scholar embarked upon such a project in constructing a social history of the Black Student Union in anticipation of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that organization’s founding. During that project, several of the group’s members were interviewed. That recent undertaking serves as both the impetus and model for this proposal to conduct an oral history of Kenyon’s Latino/a student experiences.

### Community Partnerships

Many of the best oral history projects begin as a partnership between the compilers and members of the local community in which the project is to take place. The partnerships are formed out of mutual interest and depend upon true reciprocity. As much as the persons conducting the interviews must be committed to the project, members of the community about which the project is focused must see the value and benefit of their participation.

This project is being proposed after consultation and in conjunction with the officers of Adelante. The student-principal interviewer, both a member and officer of the organization, is involved in the celebration being planned to commemorate the founding of the college’s first recognized association of Latino/a students. While members have expressed regret that little has been compiled to date to document the experiences of Latino/a students, staff and administrators at Kenyon College, many see this project as an important opportunity to discover the stories of those who were among the first to matriculate and teach at the college. Having the cooperation of the association will facilitate gaining access to alumni lists and documents generated by the organization. It should also enhance the likelihood that current members and former members will consent to being interviewed.

One other component of partnership building involves seeking institutional support for the project. The student-principal will enlist the assistance of the College archives staff to search for records of relevant persons and events. Kenyon's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion will be consulted. The Office of Alumni Affairs will be asked to assist in compiling lists of Latino/a graduates as well as publicizing the project to provide opportunities for all persons interested in the history of Latino/as at Kenyon to contribute narratives about their time and experiences on Kenyon's campus. Attached are letters of endorsement and commitment as community partners from some of the institutional and organizational offices mentioned.

### Oral History Methodologies

While the construction of social histories ordinarily involves traditional archival methods, the focus of this project will utilize both conventional and digital oral history approaches. The project team will endeavor to identify potential alumni narrators across various graduation classes as well as faculty and staff for interviews. In addition to conducting as many in-person interviews as can be accomplished during the summer portion of this project, it is anticipated that several remote interviews will be obtained by way of telephone and teleconferencing technologies.

As the project's archives are being built, the primary collection will hold the interviews conducted by the project team, comprised largely of volunteers guided by the student-principal and her faculty mentor. As a way of expanding the reach of this endeavor, interested persons will be invited and encouraged to submit audio and video "shorts," 3 minute statements or remarks that are guided by a series of questions or prompts. These "shorts" will likely serve as a way to identify persons in possession of photos and relevant artifacts as well as for follow up interviews.

Professor Sheffield, the faculty mentor in this project, will conduct training in oral history skills and techniques for the student-principal and others who volunteer to work on the project. He will also give instruction on ethical considerations and work to familiarize project participants with the Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association as they relate to responsibilities owed to interviewees in oral history projects. The host institution will provide recording equipment, computing resources, and support in digital audio capture, processing and storage.

### Pedagogical Considerations

Institutions of Higher Learning are increasingly interested in the quality of the learning experiences of their students. The Association of American Colleges and Universities has been at the forefront of encouraging and promoting the

adoption of “high impact educational practices” through the design and delivery of so-called “active” learning experiences and opportunities. Among the practices identified by the AAC&U as “high impact” are Collaborative Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, and Community-based Learning. As supported by an increasing body of literature about these practices, students who participate in these types of experiences report developing greater interest and satisfaction with the subject of their study, deeper learning and confidence with the subject matter, and a greater connection with the people and places at the sites of learning. The project being proposed contains elements of each of the aforementioned high impact practices. The oral history being designed involves a close collaboration between the student-principal and her faculty mentor. They will collaborate over nine (9) weeks in the summer in designing and executing the summer phase of the project. Oral history approaches have been incorporated into this project’s qualitative research methodology making it an excellent example of undergraduate research. Of course, the project arises out of collaboration with a historically underrepresented student population, so there is significant engagement with issues of diversity and global learning. The project has special meaning since the student-principal identifies as an immigrant, woman of color of Mexican heritage. Since the project emanates from a community partnership, community-based learning is a major component of the students’ experience.

### Qualifications of the Applicants

Alma Urbano is a sociology major who was selected as an Adams Summer Legal Scholar in 2015. Through that fellowship, she served as a research assistant to Professor of Sociology Marla Kohlman. She also participated in the socio-legal research methods workshop presented to participants in the summer scholars program. She has served as a member and officer of Adelante, Kenyon’s Latino/a student organization.

Ric Sheffield, Professor of Sociology and Legal Studies, is Director of the Adams Summer Legal Scholars Program, Kenyon’s undergraduate legal studies research opportunity. He regularly teaches a research methods course that includes a unit on oral history methodologies. He also served as site director and faculty member of the Ohio Humanities Council’s Oral History Institute at Kenyon College in 2015. He is the founding director of the Community Within, initially conceived as the Knox County Black History Digital Archives and now expanding to include oral histories of other underrepresented populations in rural Knox County, Ohio. He previously supervised a student project that endeavored to construct a social history of Kenyon’s Black Student Union.

### Project Outcomes and Deliverables

There are three primary objectives for the summer phase of the proposed oral history project: 1) the design and creation of an archive reflecting the experiences of Latino/a students at Kenyon College; 2) the teaching and acquisition of oral history skills and approaches; and 3) a public presentation at both the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the founding of Adelante as well as a college-wide lecture and unveiling of the archive based upon the material acquired and contained in the archive. It is expected that the public presentation in the fall should yield additional interviews among the alumni returning for the event.

The project plan is to complete fifteen (15) interviews over the course of the summer, transcribe the interviews, and incorporate them in the electronic, online instance of the archive. The student-principal will design the webpages that introduce the project and prepare the text that describes the collection.

The initial phase of the project will include research in the College archives, preparation of a list of alumni to which invitations to be interviewed will be sent, and scheduling interviews. Phase two will involve soliciting and digitally processing 3 minute audio and/or video “shorts” from interested participants. Phase three will focus on preparing the interview questions and conducting interviews, both in-person and electronically. The fourth phase will require processing and transcribing the completed interviews.

## Summary and Conclusions

By its very nature, an oral history project reflects several dimensions of high impact educational practices while at the same time providing students with opportunities to engage in academic work that is as personally rewarding as it is intellectually stimulating. In addition to providing training and exposure to oral history methodologies, the project will promote collaboration with a community organization as well as address institutional diversity goals. The project under consideration has enormous potential for benefiting the student participant, the community to be engaged, and the institution as a whole. We hope that it will serve as a model for similar projects that could be undertaken on other GLCA campuses.

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