

February 2018

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### Recommended Citation

Grassi, Elizabeth; Castro, Obdulia; Burson, Paul; and Burson, Rosa (2018) "Empowering Communities in Worlds Apart: Regis University Studying "Abroad" in the Neighborhood," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 53 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol53/iss1/12>

# Empowering Communities in Worlds Apart

## *Regis University Studying 'Abroad' in the Neighborhood*

By Elizabeth Grassi, Obdulia Castro, Paul Burson, Rosa Burson

**Regis University** is located on a beautifully kept campus, an island in the middle of the urban sprawl of northwest Denver, Colorado. It is surrounded by a growing immigrant Hispanic community that has at times been invisible. True to its Jesuit mission, Regis fosters interdisciplinary collaboration and provides numerous opportunities for community-based and service learning. Taking advantage of these resources, two faculty members from the education and languages departments joined the Center for Service Learning to develop a program that would close the gap between our students and the immigrant Hispanic community, with the overarching goal of making our students and our Hispanic neighbors “real” to each other.

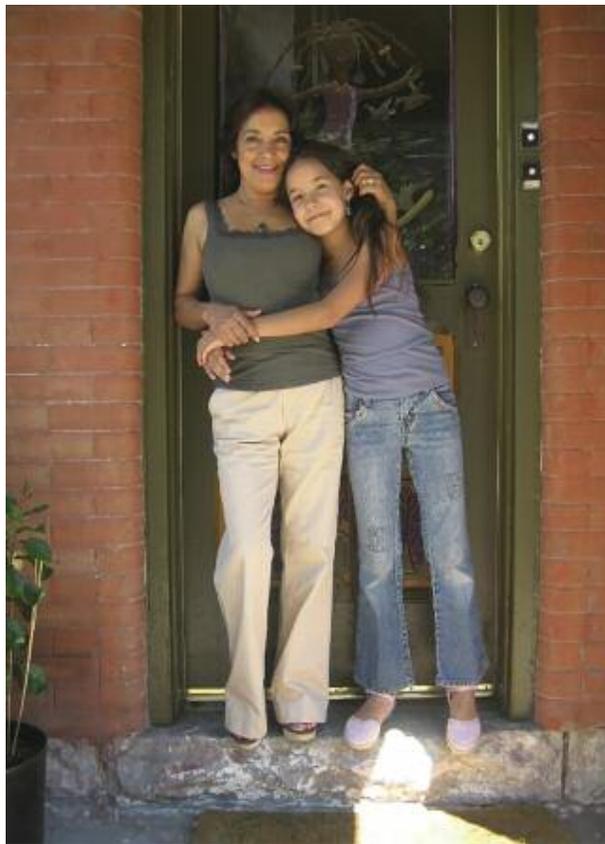
Both departments wanted to change the existing power paradigm to create a community-based program where the families provided service to our students and our students became the receivers and the learners. Inspired by a program developed by Ethel Jorge at Pitzer College in California, we developed the Spanish-English Exchange Program (SEEP). This program, informally known as the “study abroad in the neighborhood,” brings Regis students into the homes of local immigrant Hispanic families for a semester. The families decide the agenda; students participate in daily family activities, explore the neighborhood, shops, and churches with the families, learn how to cook, dance, and speak the language. Regis students practice Spanish in a natural environment, learn about the family’s culture and how the particular family navigates the challenges of U.S. society and school systems.

**“Coming from a foreign country experience where you are the foreigner, you realize how big that is. And now being back in the States you realize that no matter where you are in the US there are thousands of people going through the same experience. They live down the street from my university. They are everywhere. It’s awesome how diverse Denver is.”**

*– Student participant, interview*

Participation in this program has allowed our students to establish unique relationships with neighbors they would not have met were it not for this project. “Finding the unfamiliar in familiar places” is what students encounter every week. The families “adopt” our students as their own and readily share the struggles they experience as immigrants living in the U.S.

**“My relationship with my family has developed from initial awkward greeting of trying to use the proper cultural norms, to letting myself help A. set the table for dinner. After only two months of weekly visits I have connected with this family because we both have openly welcomed each other. I have learned more about their**



history, values, and personalities in our relaxed setting than I ever would have through a formal and instructional method.”

– *Student reflective essay*

As a result of this honest and candid relationship, our students experience the reality of immigrant life: the trauma of deportation and discrimination, economic difficulties, lack of health insurance or basic needs, and school issues the families experience regularly.

“For a school project, one of the kids in the family needed to gather information and images to present with. He needed to have access to a local library and be able to use the Internet. His family didn’t know where the nearest library was, and didn’t know how to use the Internet, print pictures, or have pictures

printed at Kinkos. They did not have access to these because of their language and their economic status, and his grade could have suffered in the class.”

– *Student reflective essay*

The families also rely on our students to bring cultural capital to the homes. And when students bring the families on campus to eat or watch sporting events, the families gain access to a space that was next door but where they did not feel invited before. Much to our delight, in the last two years this program has come full circle and the original children from the host families now attend Regis University and visit other families in the program through their classes. We greatly value the knowledge our neighbors have imparted to our students, and, in exchange, our neighbors readily invite our students into their homes year after year.

“I derive great self-satisfaction from this process because I genuinely love the experience, not particularly because it is a “service”, but more on the basis of the great relationships you establish. ... This summer I am going to help my Spanish brother apply to college. What a privilege! To pass on knowledge I have acquired through my time here, and in turn, to learn from an amazing group of people.”

– *Student participant, program evaluation*

Elizabeth Grassi is director of assessment for Regis University and professor and chairperson in the Department of Education. Obdulia Castro is a professor of modern and classical languages. Melissa Nix is the director of Curriculum & Intercultural Programming, and Paul Burson is the director of Student Development & Community Partnerships, both in the Center for Service Learning at Regis University.