

Special Remarks delivered by Dr. Cristián Doña-Reveco, OLLAS Director as part of the 20th anniversary of UNO's Office of Latino/Latin American Studies.

November 3, 2023

Good evening / Buenas tardes,

Thank you again for joining us today. I would like to thank all the wonderful work that Yuri, Ana D-O, and Brenda have done to make this such a wonderful event. I would also like to reiterate my thanks to UNO's Senior Vice Chancellor, Dr. Phil He; UNO's College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office, UNO's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and to the Sherwood Foundation, who sponsored this event. I would also like to thank Amy Schindler, Director of UNO Archives and Special Collections. Amy has curated the main Anniversary Exhibition which is on display in UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections. Her team have put together a set of traveling displays highlighting the history of OLLAS, one of which is displayed in the hallway.

I want to use this opportunity to share my deepest appreciation for the work that our affiliated faculty do for OLLAS. I am extremely lucky to be part of such a wonderful group of people who care for and respect each other.

I would like to begin by stating two key things about OLLAS. First, we are the only academic unit within the entire University of Nebraska system dedicated to the research, teaching, and community engagement of the Latino community and Latin American cultures and nations. Even more, there is no other institution in the Midwest /Great Plains that has an academic program, a community-relevant research program, and a community engagement program "under the same roof."

These three areas define, feed, and reinforce each other, as well as define our three main goals:

1. To prepare students to thrive in a culturally and demographically changing environment.
2. To pursue research to serve Omaha's Latino community; and
3. To promote and highlight Latino and Latin American cultures through community programs.

While, I have only been the director of OLLAS since 2017, OLLAS has been part of my professional development since 2007 when I was a graduate student at Michigan State University. That year I participated in Cumbre; my first introduction to the wonderful work that was being done here. Then in 2012, I applied for a two-year postdoc at OLLAS. Now, since I have been living in Omaha since 2017, you can guess the result of that application... Finally, in 2016, while living in Chile I applied to become OLLAS director. I remembered exactly where I was in early March 2017 when I got the call from JBA offering me the position. In fact, I was driving, and I had to tell him to call me again in a few minutes... I started working here in August of 2017, and this has so far been one of the most rewarding jobs that I have ever had.

What is it that makes OLLAS such a unique and wonderful program?

First, is what I would call the OLLAS' soul. Something that, I argue, Lourdes imbued to every aspect of its structure. The work we do in OLLAS comes from a Latino/Latin American sociological tradition that considers research and education key to our community's self-consciousness and seeks to use knowledge as a transformational power.

Second, nowadays that the public (and many universities) around the country are increasingly questioning the "value" of higher education and specifically of the social sciences and the humanities, I think that there is no better example of their relevance than our former and current students. They are out there working in schools, community organizations, providing legal and health services to underrepresented groups, in brief responding to their vocation, their calling, of serving their community, our community. Over 140 students have graduated with a minor in Chicano/Latino Studies since its creation in 1998, and about sixty with a degree in Latino/Latin American Studies since 2004. I am happy to report that this year we have more than twenty-five majors, the largest group in the history of OLLAS. Little by little we are one of the few programs that has shown significant growth in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Community engagement through research, as well as through cultural and educational events and are also the hallmarks of OLLAS. During its twenty-year history, OLLAS has published more than forty research reports, policy briefings, blogs, and factsheets relevant to the Latino community. These are continually used by community organizations in their funding proposals and policy documents, among others. Recently, we have been documenting through oral histories, interviews, and surveys the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 in our community.

At the same time, we have done 8 *Cinematecas*, in collaboration with Film Streams and we are going for our 4th *ArteLatinx*—a regional exhibition of Latino artists and their work—in September of next year. Internally to UNO, the OLLAS learning community serves our students and the recipients of the two scholarships we administer helping them to succeed in college. This in addition to multiple Charlas, workshops, and other educational events.

We have begun two new community relevant events. First, our High School student conference, which first edition took place in March of this year. Our objective is to influence a growing number of Latino high school students to pursue a college degree. The second, just a few months ago in June, our OLLAS summer school for teachers, through which we want to prepare high schools teachers, not only to teach Latino/Latin American Studies, but also to engage with the growing number of Latino students in Omaha and Nebraska. This summer school is the starting point for graduate certificate in Latino/Latin American Studies mainly for teacher and those working in community organizations.

We have been fortunate to have the support of several foundations that have believed in the importance of our community engagement efforts. My deepest thanks to our current funders: the Mammel Foundation, the Omaha Community Foundation, the Sherwood Foundation, and the Weitz Family Foundation.

OLLAS has had many successes in these 20 years, but I don't want to be self-complacent. There is a lot that we have lacked capacity to do and other things we still need to do. We need to be better and stronger advocates for our students on campus, not only our OLLAS students, but all Latino students. We need to highlight the wonderful teaching, research, and creative activities that our faculty do. We need to pursue new collaborative research projects with our community.

Most importantly, we need to continue reinforcing the idea that OLLAS is one of UNO's gems, one which, with their help, can grow to a state and regional center. Only then we will be able to make true the original name of OLLAS, the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies of the Great Plains. I hope that I can count on your support and participation in these and all future endeavors.

Thank you,

Now I would like to introduce Dr. Deborah Smith-Howell, Senior Advisor to the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.