Last fall Michelle Romero, a senior from Boston, was invited to serve on a focus group that provided input to Catholic University’s new Hispanic Recruitment and Retention Committee. She jumped at the opportunity. When it comes to cultural diversity, Romero has a lot to say.

The first-generation American is proud of her Dominican Republic heritage. And as co-chair of the University’s Latin Alliance student group, she is helping to ensure that all Hispanic students at CUA have the opportunity to share their pride.

“My background is what defines me. No one should have to lose that when they come to college,” says Romero, who is pursuing a double major in Spanish for international service and French.

Working together with her Latin Alliance co-chair, senior Alexandra Vereau, Romero says the goal of the group is to encourage a celebration of culture, fellowship, and service. “We work to educate all CUA students and faculty about Hispanic culture, and we work to educate each other. People don’t always realize there are many cultural differences between Hispanic groups,” she says, pointing out that she and Vereau, who was born in Peru, grew up with different traditions.

“We are also a service organization,” she says. “In keeping with the Catholic mission of our University, we want to reach out to others in need. Because so many of us speak Spanish and understand the culture, we are in a unique position to provide service to Hispanic communities.”

Hispanic-Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the United States. Speaking in September at one of CUA’s Hispanic Heritage Month events, President John Garvey noted, “Hispanic culture plays a central role in the United States, and especially in our Catholic churches. Forty-eight million Hispanics are living in the United States today. More than 35 percent of all Catholics living in America are Hispanic. Nearly 4,500 of our parishes now have Hispanic or Latino ministries. Catholic University welcomes and celebrates this.”

Soon after becoming President in July 2010, Garvey convened the Hispanic Recruitment and Retention Committee, co-chaired by Christine Mica, dean of University admissions, and Enrique Pumar, associate professor of sociology. The committee surveyed students, faculty, staff, and alumni and developed recommendations on how the University could improve outreach to recruit more Hispanic students and faculty members.

The numbers are improving. Freshman enrollment of Hispanic students increased from 8 percent in 2010–2011 (82 out of 993 students enrolled in fall 2010) to 10 percent (93 out of 904 students enrolled in fall 2011) in 2011–2012.

But the effort is not just about numbers, says Mica. “We are striving to foster an environment in which students of all cultures are welcomed and supported.”

Toward that end, the committee has recommended the development of mentoring programs for Hispanic students. In recent years, Mica’s office has added Spanish-language pages to the University’s admissions website, and staff members have traveled to locations such as Puerto Rico and South Florida to more actively reach Hispanic students. The Office of Admissions has two Spanish-speaking recruiters, and is in the process of hiring a native Spanish-speaking recruiter located in the South Florida region.

“The growing Hispanic population in the United States is transforming society and the Catholic Church,” says Mario Ortoz, CUA’s director of the Latin American and Latino Studies program, assistant professor in the Department of Modern Languages and...
The students worked at a medical clinic in the small village and provided health classes to school children. Terry Walsh, assistant professor of nursing and director of under-graduate programs, oversees the program at the School of Nursing, working in partnership with Maxwell. “The service element to this program is so important, especially for students who themselves come from Hispanic backgrounds; it’s so special and personally gratifying for them,” says Walsh.

“And in a city like Washington the opportunities are endless. Recently a group of nursing students went over to the Home Depot near campus, where day laborers wait for work, and provided them with public health information. This program showcases the mission of Catholic University and the humanity of nursing so beautifully,” says Walsh.

Legal Interpreter/Translation Program

Alexandra Verea never dreamed she could find such satisfaction by using her Spanish language skills to help other people. Last spring she was one of 12 advanced Spanish language students selected for the first legal interpreter/translation program, an innovative new venture jointly sponsored by the Columbus School of Law Columbus Community Legal Services and the modern languages and literatures department.

Department Chair Alvarez helped develop the program and says collaboration is the key. “We worked closely with the law school, which already had a strong pro bono program in place but was often unable to help Hispanic clients when the law student was not bilingual. So we developed a formal internship that includes a practicum on legal translation and interpretation, as well as other information about the legal system before our undergraduate students work with the law school and their clients,” she explains.

“We have a definite increase in the need for our services over the last few years, due in part to the economic crisis,” says Lisa Martin, clinical associate at the law school. “Representing the community was something we really wanted to do, but our resources have been limited. This was a brilliant solution. The program allows us to continue to serve the community, while giving advanced language students increased knowledge and experience.”

Courses and Programs

When Carmen Garcia graduated from Catholic University in 2008 with a B.A. degree, she was in high demand. She quickly landed a job with the U.S. Department of Labor as a benefits adviser, where she was asked to translate federal regulations into Spanish and to serve as an official translator in benefits appeal cases.

Today she is the student programs coordinator for the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, where she also participates in diversity recruitment efforts.

“Starting out as a science major and then, while looking for a language elective, Dr. Alvarez encouraged me to take her Spanish translation course. As a native Spanish speaker, I thought it would be easy. But it proved to be as challenging as any of my science classes. I quickly learned that translation is an art form and requires delving into all of the nuances of a particular language and culture,” says Garcia.

She continued with more advanced translation courses and soon changed her major to Spanish for international service, a program that Alvarez says offers great career potential in a generally difficult job market for new graduates. “Our graduates are landing jobs right out of college in finance, health care, nonprofit organizations, and government because employers understand the changing demographics in the United States and the importance of having...
an international focus,” says Alvarez.

CUA also offers a minor in Latin American and Latino Studies, which Ortiz says focuses on learning about the Hispanic culture with an emphasis on civic and global engagement. In the fall of 2010, Ortiz launched a new lecture series on Hispanic Civic Engagement. With several lectures each semester, some drawing upward of 100 people, the initiative seeks to strengthen collaboration between CUA and the Washington, D.C., area Hispanic community.

Faculty teaching Spanish language at the University represent a wide variety of Hispanic heritages, including Cuban, Costa Rican, Colombian, Chilean, Argentine, Puerto Rican, Spanish, Venezuelan, Peruvian, and Salvadoran.

Outside the languages department, other programs also emphasize a commitment to culture. The Benjamin T. Rome School of Music’s Latin American Center for Graduate Studies in Music promotes the study, research, and performance of Ibero-American music. The National Catholic School of Social Service offers bilingual internships, with an emphasis on pairing Spanish-speaking social work students with field work experiences that serve Hispanic communities.

In fall 2010, two CUA education professors received a $1.1 million federal grant to develop a master’s program that prepares teachers to serve young children with special needs from low-income, multicultural families. The program has provided a unique opportunity for Spanish-speaking students to reach out to local children in Hispanic communities.

The School of Theology and Religious Studies (STRS) offers a Master of Divinity degree with a specialization in Hispanic ministry.

“Four in ten U.S. Catholics are Hispanic. Their celebration of the faith comes with cultural differences that go beyond language and they have a rich tradition of devout worship and music. We must train our priests and lay ministers to serve these communities with respect for their religious customs,” says the bilingual priest, who often assists Hispanic students who come to the University with English as their second language.

Toward the Future

Noting the changes taking place at Catholic University, Father Ford says he is hopeful. “We still have a way to go in terms of developing an infrastructure that supports Hispanic students. We are moving in the right direction. Most of us know the expression ‘Mi casa es su casa.’ Our motto must be ‘Mi universidad es su universidad.’”

Father Ford was on hand in September to introduce his friend Miguel Díaz, the first Hispanic U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, who was at CUA to give a lecture timed with the University’s celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. Díaz said that America should be a place where “differences are welcomed rather than melted away. We are all part of a rich tapestry of differences. Those differences can be woven together for the common good,” he said. “We must avoid interpreting unity as sameness.”

Romero was in the audience, and she says that statement resonated with her. “When I came to CUA as a freshman, it was a bit of a culture shock. I didn’t see many students who were like me. I remember feeling like I might melt away. I was afraid I would have to lose my cultural identity to fit in.

“But ultimately I found that it is my responsibility to promote my culture. And as I got more involved in the University through service and leadership activities, I realized my identity as a Hispanic-American college student was valued and appreciated,” she says.

“There is a change going on at Catholic University,” she adds. “The University is working to raise awareness and celebrate differences. But it’s the students making the change too; and from all cultures. We are letting our voices be heard.”

Miguel Díaz, the first Hispanic U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, helped celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month at Catholic University in September. He told the audience, “We are all part of a rich tapestry of differences.”

Enrique Pumar, associate professor of sociology and co-chair of the University’s Hispanic Recruitment and Retention Committee, spoke on the committee’s findings to CUA’s Board of Trustees last spring.

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David Driver contributed to this article.