

A PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY

Since its establishment in 1947, CSULA has produced success stories based on its foundational and ongoing commitment to social justice. In many respects CSULA is a people's university, educating well known individuals such as, the current CEOs of L.A. Metro (Art Leahy '74), Southern California Edison (Alan J. Fohrer '81), and the former President of Boeing (James A. Bell '97).¹ In addition to business, CSULA graduates have left their mark on Hollywood's movie industry, from famous actors like Academy Award winner Edward James Olmos to visual effects specialists in popular films such as *Avatar* (Ruben Marquez '04), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows II* (Joseph Silva '09), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Robert Huynh '92). CSULA graduates have also gone on to succeed in prominent fields of science and government, including NASA astronaut Samuel T. Durrance '72, '74, the 41st U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin '83, and former U.S. Congresswoman Diane Watson '67. These alumni share a link that is forged in CSULA's classrooms and hallways by

¹ Donald R. Gerth, *The People's University: A History of the California State University* (Berkeley: Berkeley Public Policy Press, 2010).

its professors and programs, but above all by the students from the surrounding communities.

The CSU system was founded to educate teachers for California. An Economics professor from Occidental College noted that the second wave of baby boomers fueled “the unprecedented expansion of higher educational facilities” and the need for California to have a State University system.² Before California’s “Normal Schools” became “Teacher Colleges” with authority to award B.A. degrees in education in 1921, they had been training schools for elementary teachers. In 1935, these schools turned into “State Colleges.” In the first half of the twentieth century, the number of State universities quickly grew. In addition to shaping educated individuals, the CSU’s mission includes the aim to produce “responsible people to contribute to California’s schools, economy, culture, and future... and to provide public services that enrich the university and its communities.”³ Though the focus on improving the surrounding community of each campus is shared by all CSUs, CSULA has proven to be among the best in achieving these goals, as is evident in its history. Located near the heart of a major metropolitan city, CSULA has not only ensured that the people of Los Angeles and greater California have access to an affordable quality education, it has also held true to its tradition of promoting social justice and the betterment of its surrounding neighborhoods. Over the years, CSULA has increasingly recognized that its purpose is not just educating but reinvesting into the community.

In the nineteenth century, the hills on which the campus is built were primarily used for ranching, while the adjacent hills were sold to create the communities that later

² Donald Dewey and W. Askin, *That’s a Good One: Cal State L.A. at 50*. California State University, Los Angeles, 1997.

³ “The Mission of the California State University,” Public Affairs, October 18, 2013, <http://www.calstate.edu/PA/info/mission.shtml> (accessed February 22, 2015).

became El Sereno and Alhambra.⁴ From 1900 to 1915, El Sereno was divided into four neighborhoods that eventually coalesced into “the serene place” or El Sereno when Los Angeles incorporated the area. As the city’s population grew in the 1920s, churches, high schools, and other municipal buildings and public spaces were built.

CSULA had uncertain beginnings in which change was constant. Before the groundbreaking of the CSULA campus on a hilltop overlooking the 10 freeway on 5 May 1955, the first home of the campus (then named Los Angeles State College), was on the Vermont Avenue campus of Los Angeles City College.⁵ During the first years of LASC, the student population was strikingly more homogenous than today. As seen from the first issues of the campus newspaper published in 1948, LASC’s students were predominantly white and male. Though enrollment was initially small, this quickly changed. From the first semester to the third, the student body grew from 167 students to 1,488.⁶ Often encouraging student participation in annual picnics, student clubs, plays and balls, newspapers generally focused on fostering a dynamic student social life. Initially, most students were expected to become elementary and secondary teachers to fill the Los Angeles Board of Education’s estimated 10,000 vacancies between 1949 and 1955.⁷ Indeed, CSULA’s School of Education, renowned for its teacher credential programs and faculty, embodies the campus’ historic commitment to education, as the university has maintained strong ties with the Los Angeles

⁴ John R. Chávez, “RANCHO ROSA DE CASTILLA: Hispanic Continuity in Greater East Los Angeles.” *Southern California Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (December 1, 1998): 399–418.

⁵ Dewey and Askin *That’s a Good One: Cal State L.A. at 50*.

⁶ Lew Kennedy, “Increased Enrollment, Faculty, Clubs Good Indication of State’s Progress,” *Los Angeles State College* newspaper, June 2, 1948, Vol.1, No.1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Unified School District (LAUSD) since its opening. Despite the best efforts of LASC to forge a unique identity, the college needed to acquire official recognition.

Denied accreditation by the Western Association for Schools and Colleges (WASC) for lacking its own independent physical campus, school officials searched for possible locations, eventually deciding on a site owned by the Department of Public Works.⁸ The rough terrain made both construction and instruction challenging. While an entire hill at the north end of the CSULA campus was being removed to help level the future athletics field, students crammed into twenty four “temporary” bungalows that were never far from the sound of massive construction projects, which did not make the early atmosphere of the campus ideal for student learning.⁹ Despite the chaotic climate of the campus’ early years, faculty and officials were active in social justice campaigns outside the classroom.

Activism among CSULA faculty can be traced back to its early years. In 1951, school administrators participated in public debate on whether to move the campus from City College to East Los Angeles College.¹⁰ Providing high quality education at a low cost for students has been an imperative for campus administrators and faculty. In 1961, at a new faculty luncheon, then president Howard S. McDonald boasted that the campus was California’s best state college for costing “less per student than any other.”¹¹ In 1963, faculty even threatened to boycott the inauguration ceremony of President Johnson in protests against “housing lists that permitted racial segregation.”¹²

CSULA’s surrounding cities underwent significant demographic changes when exclusionary and discriminato-

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Dewey, 7.

¹⁰ Dewey, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

ry housing practices began to erode. Non-whites made up only 0.4 percent of Alhambra's official population in 1950.¹³ Up to then, the city mirrored its neighbors (South Pasadena, Monterey Park, San Gabriel) in being exclusively white and middle class. Discriminatory lending practices and exclusionary policies by banks, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), real estate brokers, and homebuyers were linchpins of Alhambra's de jure residential segregation. In 1950, new California fair-housing acts initiated a gradual process of demographic change among Los Angeles' suburbs. With more open-housing, many middle class Italian-Americans and Armenian-Americans left their enclaves in East Los Angeles, Lincoln Heights, and Boyle Heights to resettle in Alhambra.¹⁴ Much of Boyle Heights' Jewish population "began to enjoy a newfound affluence" and also moved to Alhambra during this period.¹⁵

In the 1950s, a middle class Mexican-American population emerged in Alhambra. When the economic backgrounds of Alhambra's residents became more diverse in the 1960s, the development of apartments became a hotly debated topic during City Council meetings.¹⁶ A resident at a city meeting emphasized the traditional strength of Alhambra as "the ownership of single-family homes."¹⁷ In the 1980s, the city experienced another "growth spurt" with the influx of Asian-American groups. In 1990 Asians and Latinos made up about 35 percent of the city's population while whites constituted about 25 percent. By 2010, however, the Asian population grew to be the majority with 52 percent

¹³ Edwing Suong Gonzalez, "Odd Man Out: Shifting Notions of Culture, Community and Marginalization in the Power Struggle for Alhambra, 1940s to 1970s," *Perspectives* 36, (2009): 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New ed. London; New York: Verso, 2006.

¹⁶ Gonzales., 34.

¹⁷ Alhambra City Council, Meeting Minutes, Meeting of April 2, 1968, Book #38.

while whites decreased to 10 percent.¹⁸ Between 1980 and 2010, Asian majority populations coalesced in other San Gabriel Valley cities, the most striking of which was Monterey Park as the city's Asian population accounted for a 58 percent majority in 2010.¹⁹ As the surrounding community changed, so did the student population. What has not changed, however, is the campus community's commitment to social justice.

Various names of campus buildings and rooms reflect CSULA's dedication to social and racial justice. Shortly after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968, campus officials renamed the campus' first permanent classroom building, North Hall after the slain civil rights leader, which was also the largest building of its kind west of the Missouri River.²⁰ In the same year, CSULA also established the nation's first Chicano Studies Department, which was part of a wider push for campuses to offer courses in ethnic studies. In the late 1960s, Latino students demanded for a hall to bear a Spanish name that included proper recognition of accents.²¹ The naming of Rubén Salazar Hall, named after the Mexican-American *Los Angeles Times* reporter who was killed while covering a protest march by Latino youth against the Vietnam War in August 1970, satisfied the students' grievances. For the increasing population of African-American and Latino students from low-income backgrounds, CSULA's willingness to name important campus buildings after remarkable individuals who fought against social injustices reflects its commitment

¹⁸ City of Alhambra: Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice (City of Alhambra 111 South First Street, Alhambra, CA 91801; May 2013), 11.

¹⁹ "Monterey Park Nears a Demographic Milestone, yet Race Rarely Discussed," *Los Angeles Times* Accessed March 9, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/local/politics/la-me-race-monterey-park-elections-20150225-story.html>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

to equality. Other than buildings bearing names of social justice advocates, a room was named after an exemplary young CSULA student who tragically died on campus.

On 1 October 1987 a strong earthquake damaged campus structures, causing honor roll student Lupe Elias Exposito's death. In 1988, the Biological Sciences conference room was renamed to commemorate Exposito. Beyond these commemorations, the campus later provided considerably greater support for student outreach and service opportunities.

In the 1990s CSULA and the greater CSU system provided crucial institutional support to ensure CSU students had access to opportunities for service in surrounding disadvantaged communities. In 1997 the Community Service Learning Strategic Plan was passed by the CSU Board of Trustees. In service learning, an academic course is paired with a reputable community partner to provide some form of assistance. Students then share the impact of their service by way of reflection and writing. From this participation, students develop a strong moral sensibility and gain career-related experience. Former California Governor Gray Davis' letter in April 1999 to all California public institutions of higher education urged these schools to establish a mandatory community service requirement for all students. Within a year the Board of Trustees passed yet another watershed resolution requiring campus presidents to ensure students have access to service learning opportunities that faculty deemed academically appropriate. In the years leading up to 2008, the Office of Community Service Learning at the CSU Chancellor's Office was able to secure millions in outside funding. Some notable donors included the state government, AmeriCorps, and the J. Paul Getty Trust. Among all the programs on campus, the Educational Participation in the Community (EPIC), established in 1966 by student grassroots organizing efforts and currently under the auspices of the Center for Engagement, Service and the

Public Good, best represents CSULA's drive to promote student investment into neglected communities.

EPIC works with over 100 community partners such as the Adelante Program and School on Wheels Inc. to help volunteer students participate in social justice, as these non-profit organizations assist people from various disadvantaged backgrounds. For forty three years, EPIC has coordinated its annual Toy and Food Drive for which student volunteers collect donations on campus for needy families. Last year the campaign served 175 struggling families of various backgrounds.²² EPIC also has developed a very close partnership with Title I elementary schools where the majority of students qualify for free or reduced cost lunch programs. In service learning, volunteers have the chance to work directly with young students and to create quarterly activities and presentations that are both concrete and fun. From such work, youth gain a better understanding of abstract topics such as student success, obtained through proper nutrition, completing homework, keeping a neat backpack, learning how to ask questions, etc. These same volunteers strive to bring about creative awareness as to how elementary students' daily activities and expectations connect to later success. This unique kind of student involvement is rare because it targets not only middle and high school students but also children in elementary schools. EPIC student volunteers explain essential skills and the reasons why they are important in young students' lives.

Volunteers also get the opportunity to put knowledge from the classroom to good use. According to the EPIC mission statement, volunteers are able "to imple-

²² Anh Hong (Community Service Learning Coordinator), interview by Irvin Sanchez, EPIC department, Los Angeles, March 10, 2015.

ment classroom theory in real life situations.”²³ In the America Reads/America Counts Program, which EPIC coordinates, CSULA students tutor children in inner-city elementary schools in math and reading for an entire academic year. In other areas of work, namely the Summer Youth Engagement Program, students ages fourteen to twenty four are employed, mostly in administrative work, on campus during the summer to gain valuable career experience and encourage the pursuit of higher education. Throughout its long history, EPIC has stood as a symbol of CSULA’s commitment to serving surrounding communities. Quarterly, over 300 students have been actively involved with EPIC.²⁴ Thinking of school as a crucial investment for future success has been a constant goal. The current Director, Victoria Mosqueda, shares this drive, as she holds that “one of my favorite duties is to prepare students and provide guidance to help them implement their ideas related to their majors and present their work.”²⁵ Indeed, EPIC provides students with opportunities to collaborate and engage in credible activities in communities. Having developed a very close partnership with elementary schools and maintaining its drive for social justice, EPIC’s student engagement models, co-curricular activities for service learning, have been implemented beyond our campus. Through EPIC CSULA students have consistently undergone transformative experiences, realizing the importance of investing their efforts to improve surrounding low-income communities.

When asked what was most fulfilling about his high pressure job, Metro CEO Art Leahy said it was the “chance to contribute to the future growth and shape of the city

²³ “Educational Participation in the Communities (EPIC).” *California State University, Los Angeles*. Accessed March 8, 2015.

<http://www.calstatela.edu/univ/stuaffrs/epic>.

²⁴ Anh Hong interview.

²⁵ Victoria Mosqueda, interview by Irvin Sanchez, EPICS’s department, Los Angeles, February 19, 2015.

where I grew up.”²⁶ Just as Leahy has dedicated his career to bringing Angelinos together, CSULA has done the same. CSULA’s tradition of serving the community has been a hallmark of success for its graduates. From developing quality educators for the community to ensuring students have service learning and community service opportunities, CSULA has never diverted from its identity as the people’s university, staying true to its roots of social justice. At CSULA, students are the caretakers of a rich tradition of activism and service that has and will continue to promote the well-being of its surrounding communities.

²⁶ “L.A. MTA’s Art Leahy,” *Transit Talent*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.transittalent.com/articles/index.cfm?story=ArtLeahy> (accessed March 3, 2015).



Image 1: *Our CSULA*. Using photos taken by students as well as images from CSULA library archives and special collections, Guadalupe Peña created this collage to reflect what CSULA means to this year's editing team. This is "Our CSULA."