Indianapolis today has a rapidly growing Hispanic population entering its schools, with nearly 40 percent growth in less than two years. Hispanic students tend to leave school at an earlier age, with a 38 percent national dropout rate; in Indiana, these students have the highest dropout rate, mirroring the national rate. Recent city statistics show that over 70 percent of Hispanics who do not complete high school hold unskilled jobs or are unemployed.

Such figures pose serious consequences for the Indianapolis community and it has been a major goal of IUPUI’s School of Education to try reducing the high dropout rate.

José R. Rosario, professor of education and director of the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education (CUME), is developing a three-year pilot project called “El Puente” (Spanish for “the bridge”), working with the two largest Hispanic-enrollment high schools and the Hispanic community to increase educational awareness and expectations of parents, develop leadership skills and involvement in service activities of students, and increase academic performance in preparation for post-secondary education.

An innovative component of the El Puente project has been the development of a cultural exchange program in Spain. The program is built around the ideals of service learning, targeting poor neighborhoods in U.S. and Spanish communities. Rosario believes that when students are engaged in community service, they learn that their participation can make a difference. Furthermore, he believes that it is important to develop these students’ awareness and understanding of other cultures and the growing impact of globalization at home. He notes that at-risk students are usually excluded from cultural exchange programs, which are typically offered to college preparatory and foreign language students. “Opening up such cultural opportunities to underrepresented and at-risk youth can have a strong motivating influence on them,” says Rosario. “When built around the idea of community service, cultural exchange programs can also be instrumental in developing and harnessing the leadership skills and civic sensibilities that young people need to make a lasting impact in their own communities.”

The cultural exchange component involves students and faculty at Arsenal Technical High School (ATHS) working in partnership with counterparts at a sister institution, the Instituto de Educación Secundaria La Madraza (La Madraza), in Granada, Spain. La Madraza, a public high school, is small by American standards, serving no more than 500 students, and is located in a poor, marginalized neighborhood of the city.

Faculty from IUPUI and the University of Granada (UG) participate as mentors for the program. Development of the exchange project actually began in the spring of 1998, where students from ATHS and La Madraza were introduced to each other through “virtual exchanges” using compressed video technology. These transmissions, which have continued each year since, are underwritten by IUB’s Center for the Study of Global Change (CSGC) as part of its “Student to Student” Program, an outreach program that establishes cross-cultural dialogue in real time between American and international youth so that they could explore common interests and problems, overcome stereotypes, or discuss international issues.

In April 2000, the “virtual” exchanges were transformed into “real” ones with the arrival of a team of La Madraza and UG colleagues for a one-week workshop at IUPUI. There they met with faculty and students at ATHS and had sessions on service learning as a pedagogical and dropout prevention strategy.

The visit was supported by IUPUI’s International Development Fund.

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A year later, an Indianapolis team returned the visit and spent nearly a week in Granada, March 5–10, 2001, visiting IES La Madraza and UG. The team also consulted with regional and local government authorities and led discussions on service learning. There were nine participants in the Indianapolis team: two high school students from Arsenal (Antwaun Armstad and Maria Castellanos); two teachers from Arsenal (David Banks and Lucia Gonzales); an Indianapolis Public Schools board commissioner (Don Payton); the executive director of Indianapolis’ Hispanic Education Center (Sister Marikay Duffy); two IUPUI faculty members (José R. Rosario and Monica Medina) and a graduate assistant (Kellie D. Tomey).

Participants in Spain included the dean and assistant dean of education, four faculty members, and two doctoral students from UG; the director (principal) and several teachers from La Madraza; the chief education officers from local and regional governments of Andalusia; and the mayor and deputy mayor of Granada. Activities included planning sessions that resulted in a working framework for the conduct of the student exchanges; general meetings with La Madraza faculty and students; meetings with university officials and chief education officers representing the Andalusian government; and a presentation to university students and faculty on service learning and the El Puente project. The two students from Arsenal lived with La Madraza host families, and attended classes at the school.

CSGC director Brian Winchester also visited the project for four days. He introduced participants to the work of the Bloomington center and recruited teachers and students to attend the International Studies Summer Institutes for students and teachers that are held annually in Bloomington. Approximately four teachers and eight students from IES La Madraza and Arsenal will be invited to participate in the institutes beginning as early as this summer. The agreements worked out during the April visit will allow cultural exchanges to begin as soon as resources can be secured for the program. Exchanges will be launched as early as this summer, when students and teachers from the two schools attend the CSGC Summer Institutes.

—RMN