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# *Community-Based Research, Race, and the Public Work of Democracy: Lessons From Whitman College*

Paul Apostolidis

## Abstract

This practice story tells of one professor's discovery and conduct of community-based research (CBR) at a leading liberal arts college. Originating through collaborations with an immigrant meatpacking workers' union, Whitman College's program on The State of the State for Washington Latinos has earned national recognition since its founding in 2005. The program's story speaks to the vital role CBR projects in the academy can play in addressing deeply rooted forms of racial injustice and cultural exclusion, from political under-representation to gaps in bilingual education. This narrative further highlights the importance of durable community partnerships that allow mutual trust to grow and flourish; the challenges faculty members face when institutions provide sparse infrastructure for CBR program development; the transformative effects of these endeavors on students; and the unusual success of Whitman's State of the State program in matching rigorous research with an ambitious agenda of public outreach to enhance regional democracy.

## Early Experiments: Community-based Research With Immigrant Workers

When I think about how I initially became involved with community-based research (CBR) as a faculty member at Whitman College, it occurs to me that the most pivotal conversations were with people outside the academy.(1) In those beginnings, I now see, were the sources of the unique direction our CBR projects at Whitman eventually would take. What has made our projects different—and has posed unusual challenges—has been our special dedication to making CBR public. By this, I mean our sustained and systematic effort to bring the results of CBR projects to policymakers, organization leaders, and the broader public. We aim not only to assist specific partner organizations, but also to spark a more inclusive and vibrant culture of democracy in the northwest region, especially when it comes to dealing with inequalities of race. Our movement in that direction reflects that the initial impetus for my CBR work came from beyond campus, and from leaders who were interested in broad-scale,

coalition-based social change rather than simply improving their organizations' capacities.

My first conversation about CBR happened in 2001, in my kitchen, with a young labor organizer from Brooklyn named Tony Perlstein. Tony had recently moved to Walla Walla, Washington, where Whitman is located, to organize workers at a large Tyson Foods beef plant. Two years before, these astonishing workers, most of whom were immigrants from Mexico, had pulled off the largest wildcat strike among meatpackers in decades. Now they were struggling to keep their momentum going in the face of rapid turnover due to the dismal job-related injury rates at the plant. They were also hoping to renew their tenuous support in the community, which had fortified their 6-week strike effort, but had waned in the intervening months *(Apostolidis, 2010)*.

Tony had an uncanny knack for showing up unannounced right around dinnertime. My family and I found this habit both transparent and endearing, and I empathized with it. Having been a political field organizer in an earlier life—a Philadelphia-suburbs preppie transported to the Iowa cornfields to run ground operations for Michael Dukakis—I understood something about the loneliness and the need for comfort in the midst of an organizer's never-ending grind. The more Tony told me about the remarkable courage of the Tyson workers, the more I thought: "I want to get involved in this struggle, and find a way to help students get involved, too." Thinking out loud, I proposed approaching one of Whitman's student extracurricular organizations about the situation at Tyson. Tony grinned and shook his head (and had some more chicken). "No," he said—it couldn't be just volunteer work, or the students wouldn't commit. "You need to teach a class," he told me, and it struck me that he was probably right, although I'd never done anything like that before.

That conversation led to a course-based CBR project in 2002 that rekindled the workers' hope that there were people in the community who cared about their struggles. It also inspired the students in the course to accomplish an enormous volume of collaborative research, at a high level of quality and with a spirit of maturity I had never witnessed before among our typically young, privileged undergraduates. The experience made me see how different and exciting this sort of teaching could be, and also how CBR could spark genuine campus-community reciprocity and involve undergraduate education in a broad, collective effort to tackle deeply entrenched inequalities. Combining interviews of workers about the grave health and safety problems they faced on the line with

an analysis of data about Tyson's diverse vectors of power (from its corporate customers to its campaign finance priorities), the project linked complex institutional dynamics to workers' bodily and emotional pain. The worker-leaders of Teamsters Local 556 called the students' report "the Bible"; for the students, collaborating with the workers was something akin to a revelation.

My second formative conversation about CBR occurred 2 years later during a subsequent partnership with the union. This time we focused on the 2004 elections. Joaquin Avila, an attorney who had litigated a raft of historic Voting Rights Act cases in California and Texas and had recently moved to Seattle, traveled to southeastern Washington to speak to Local 556 activists and Whitman students about boosting political mobilization and electoral inclusion among immigrant workers. Many of the union activists were legal residents but not U.S. citizens, and the few citizens scattered among the group were mostly not registered to vote. So there was a sense of unrealized potential in the room when we met with Joaquin. But with the union on the verge of being busted by the company while in the midst of a grueling contract dispute, this turned out to be our least successful partnership: Local 556 simply could not afford to expend much effort on the collaboration. In the end, the project more vividly demonstrated the obstacles to immigrant workers' political involvement than it illuminated the pathways toward voter participation.

After we met with the workers and students, Joaquin mused grimly that in terms of political marginalization, circumstances for Latinos in the State of Washington roughly paralleled those he had witnessed in Texas—in the early 1960s. And with near zero Latino political representation throughout state and local government in Washington, he underscored, support simply did not exist among public policy makers for addressing the wide range of social inequities to which Latinos were subjected, not just in labor matters but also in health care, education, and other domains. What Latinos in Washington State needed, he said, was a regular report that would identify and analyze these multiple interrelated inequalities. And such a report would have to make the case that these were not just "Latino" problems, but rather issues in which a genuine public interest was at stake. "Want to do it?" he asked me, more than half-seriously. I considered how the union was on its last legs; wondered just how I would locate new partner organizations; thought about how much the collaborations with Local 556 had meant to the students and workers—and decided to give it a try.

## The State of the State for Washington Latinos: Year 1

The long-term CBR program that grew out of these experiments and conversations came to be known as Whitman's project on the State of the State for Washington Latinos. From the very start, in 2005, it had a purpose that distinguished it from other initiatives in community-based learning and research: to influence statewide political culture and state policy, and thus to have effects that stretched well beyond the local community. At the same time, to keep the project engaged with urgent problems and to open up concrete research opportunities, it was vital that students collaborate with community partners. Thus, the story of the State of the State project is about navigating the turbulent waters we entered with the combined—and not always compatible—goals of building local community resources, raising public awareness of tenacious social inequities, and provoking shifts in public policy. We aimed to do all this through research characterized by intellectual freedom, rigor, and responsibility, and conducted by capable and enthusiastic but inexperienced undergraduate students.

I remember seeing this as a tall order in the first year of the project. At the time, I viewed what we were doing as an experiment with at best a 50-50 chance of succeeding. Twelve students took the course, and in retrospect the blemishes marring our work that semester seem more than a little unsightly. The partnerships varied widely in terms of the community member's investment in the process. The quality of the work was uneven, too. Nevertheless, rough-cut though they were, the final analyses put in sharp and disturbing perspective a range of interconnected facets of racial injustice, from a severe lack of health insurance coverage for Latinos to poor-quality trailer housing and discouraged withdrawal from electoral politics. So we went ahead with the original plan to call a press conference, and issued a general invitation to a public meeting. Joaquin predicted confidently that the response to the report would be powerful and positive. I wasn't so sure.

Joaquin could not have been more right. The report, flaws and all, struck a nerve in the Latino community, as though it validated a long-held desire for these problems to be talked about publicly, and not just by Latinos. It also broke the smooth surface of silent, polite complicity with the norms of our racially divided and highly unequal rural town, at least for a few hours. More than 150 people showed up at the public meeting we held at the college—I had been expecting closer to 50. My students held forth, with passion and sometimes in blunt terms, about the problems they had discov-

ered. Our intention had been to spark active discussion of these challenges among community members. And discussion there was—heated open conflict about the adequacy of the school district's bilingual education program. Sharp words were exchanged over one student's finding that there were no full-time bilingual teachers in the Head Start classroom where Latino children were in the vast majority. We had no plan for managing the defensiveness among community members that we should have known the students' criticisms were bound to ignite. But although the event was far from smooth, it could not have been clearer how important it had turned out to be, for campus and community alike.

That first public meeting taught me two lessons that have stayed with me ever since. First, there was a genuine need for more of this research, a need felt acutely among Latinos and a need that grounded an obligation on our part to continue this work. A slew of e-mails promptly arrived from "the other side of the mountains," inquiring about how others could access our research results, and when our students would be traveling to Seattle (the state's urban hub) or Olympia (the seat of state government). Second, the public outreach dimension of the project was certainly worthwhile, but I needed to prepare students more thoroughly for ventures into community forums and the media spotlight. We also had to find a way to handle the tensions between carrying out a partnership with community organizations and being frank—in public—about the criticisms of those organizations that arose in the research. In addition, just as the research had barely scratched the surface of the racial-ethnic inequalities pervading the region, holding a public meeting on campus and talking to local reporters were likewise only small steps toward the outreach needed to reach more diverse components of the public.

In early 2006, shortly after the public meeting, I learned there would soon be a Latino state lobbying day at the capital in Olympia. I jumped at the chance to have the students participate, along with one of our community partners who worked as a public health educator. I strategized before our visit to Olympia with a friend, Nancy Amidei, who runs a civic engagement project at the University of Washington focused on state legislative advocacy. This preparation proved crucial to the success of our trip (and convinced me that I needed to keep Nancy on board as an adviser to the project). Unlike most lobby day participants, who were planning to stop by legislators' offices unannounced, we pre-arranged a slate of meetings, which gave us a better chance of speaking with the representatives and senators and not just their staff members. We targeted the bills

on which our research gave us genuine expertise, and contacted the legislators most likely to listen to us because the students lived in their districts. We also made a point of visiting each of the three Latino legislators (a number that exemplified the problem of low Latino political representation, in a state with 147 state senators and representatives and a Latino population of over 10%).

This first trip to Olympia revealed both the extent of the challenges we faced and the opportunity the CBR gave us to speak with credibility about addressing racial inequality through state policy. An encounter with a rock-ribbed conservative lawmaker, in particular, suggested the students' potential to do more than preach to the converted. They cornered this senator as he was leaving a committee meeting. One student, Ben Secord, had barely launched his policy rap about health care for Latinos when the senator interrupted and asked, in a cut-the-crap tone, "Are any of these folks you're talking about illegals?" Of course, Ben replied. The official shot back, "Well, then, they ought to go back to where they came from—we can't support them here." At that point, my student Angela Walker, who had researched the cruelties faced by undocumented victims of domestic violence in partnership with the Walla Walla YWCA, switched the policy focus and tried a tactic Nancy had recommended: She told him a story about a woman whose abusive (legally resident) male partner had threatened to expose her undocumented status and take away her children if she tried to leave him. That was why state services for undocumented women were crucial, Angela explained. There followed a brief but telling pause in the conversation. The senator did not have a ready comeback; he seemed to "get it" that his blithe dismissal of the social and personal realities of immigrants' lives, at least in this case, just would not work. I do not know whether that lawmaker ended up supporting the domestic violence prevention programs that Angela's research indicated were needed. But the next spring he was the only Republican senator who addressed the participants in Hispanic-Latino Legislative Day, and he has met with our students every year since that first, uncomfortable exchange.

## Over-extension, Policy Breakthrough, and the Boomerang Effect

In retrospect, the first year of the State of the State for Washington Latinos set the trajectory for what lay ahead. Our experiences that year revealed the challenges we had to grapple with to make the multiple, unruly components of this ambitious project succeed and cohere. One challenge was the task of coordinating separate part-

nerships for each individual student. Many CBR projects, of course, take the more sane approach of partnering with just one organization. But given our small rural community with its limited stock of potential partners, along with our foundational commitment to addressing a wide range of issue areas, I thought we should persevere in our original mode. The second year of the project, however, showed that this was definitely not a viable long-term strategy. This was especially so given the underdeveloped institutional basis for CBR and service-oriented coursework at Whitman. Although there is a good deal of "experiential learning" that takes students off campus, until very recently tehre have been no administrators, and few faculty who work on civic engagement projects that have a curricular focus and are grounded in an explicit ethic of social responsibility.(2) So I created the structure of the State of the State program and negotiated partnerships entirely on my own. While I have always been grateful for the freedom to design a new project like this, and for the financial support that Whitman has provided, I have faced the task of building the program as a solo endeavor.

By fall 2006, word had gotten around Whitman about how exciting the State of the State experience had been for the first cohort. Now I had 16 students in the seminar—and the problems with managing 16 different partnerships predictably multiplied on both sides. In a couple of instances, students flaked out and did not follow through on their research commitments. One partner proved to have an unstable organization that abruptly relocated out of state. And with so many partnerships to manage, I simply could not keep a sufficiently close eye on the projects to make sure students were communicating with their partners and approaching their research in effective, responsible ways. Each student's research methods typically included a mix of field interviews and quantitative data collection from existing sources, as had been the case in 2005. Thus, the challenges in terms of methods training were not unrealistic, but because of the idiosyncrasies of each partnership as well as the students' lack of experience, the students needed individualized attention to help them figure out whom to interview and how to identify and access the most salient data sources. A few students needed more specialized training in survey design and basic statistical analysis because of the particular research interests of their community partners. Through some mild arm-twisting of colleagues I helped these students get the instruction they needed, which I could not provide since I do not use quantitative methods in my research. Nevertheless, the capacities of our enterprise were stretched thin, and eventually the strain showed.

These tensions showed all the more visibly because of the public dimension of our program. Following her research on Latino students at Walla Walla Community College (WWCC), one of my students made unsupported claims—at another public meeting—that WWCC was doing a disservice to its minority students. A vice president of the community college called and took me to task for letting the student make these unjustified statements. I re-examined the report, concluded that he was right, and pulled the document from our new website, but a certain degree of damage had already been done. Then, at our final gathering of all students and partners, another student stepped into a now-familiar minefield when she presented findings critical of her partner without sufficient tact, and hit a raw nerve. Viviana Gordon's excellent report had revealed racially differential treatment of youth within the juvenile justice system. But when Vivi announced her provocative title—"And Gringo Justice For All?" —her partner, a young White man who worked with kids in the local juvenile facility, took exception: He felt she was accusing him and his co-workers of being racists after he had devoted several months to working with her in good faith.

One lesson from the course project in 2006 was clear: We needed fewer partnerships. Moreover, the partnerships had to be cultivated over the long term to establish the foundation of mutual trust essential for conducting public outreach, and for handling tensions when the research yielded critical findings about our community partners' endeavors. A promising corollary was that in our small town, perhaps because it is hard for people to avoid each other, it was worth trying to make amends and work out a more mutually satisfactory collaboration when things got off to a bad start. The school district administrators who had chafed at our 2005 research responded enthusiastically when I approached them later and suggested we work out a new, mutually agreeable plan for research. The bilingual director and her husband, who with her advises the high school's Club Latino, have been highly dedicated partners ever since, and the partnership has produced some of our most eye-opening research. Part of the problem at Walla Walla Community College, in turn, was that our project had gotten entangled in internal WWCC politics. A frank conversation with the vice president clued me in to those thorny issues, cleared the air, and opened the way to later engagements.

A second lesson from the 2006 project was that the public impact of our research outside Walla Walla could go far beyond the symbolic. My student Ian Warner partnered with Joaquin that year to learn how to analyze voting returns to determine if there

were grounds for applying the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) in order to change local electoral systems. Washington State is full of voting jurisdictions where, despite large minority populations, minority candidates seldom run and even more rarely win. Ian's conclusions were clear and devastating: A VRA remedy was necessary and could be legally mandated for city council elections in the town of Sunnyside, a farming community in the heart of the Yakima Valley where the state's Latino population is most concentrated. The document that came to be known in the region as The Warner Report hit the local papers. Latino community leaders notified the federal Department of Justice, which initiated an investigation. Within a few months the town adopted a partial system of district elections for city council, replacing the entirely at-large voting arrangement that had produced discriminatory consequences. The report, the ensuing investigation, and the electoral system change were intensely controversial. The Yakima Herald-Republic denounced Ian's research and ran letters to the editor suggesting that if Latinos did not show up to vote it was because they did not care and should just go back to Mexico—again, we heard that familiar refrain from the political right, now with the added canard of lumping all Latinos into the category of Mexican immigrants. Subsequently, when a white Sunnyside official spoke out about the issue during a spring 2008 public meeting we held in the neighboring town of Toppenish, a torrent of chagrin came rushing forth. The official felt that The Warner Report imputed racist intentions to her and her colleagues—again, we sensed the stubborn difficulty, among Whites in mid-level professional jobs with Latino clients, of distinguishing between personal bigotry and racist institutional practices.

In spring 2007, we matched the increasing public visibility and consequentiality of our research with a more highly developed plan for public outreach. It was an agenda I had prepared with professional help, enlisting the expensive but valuable services of a policy communications consultant, David Messerschmidt. David had a background in public radio and a keen sense of how to nudge the students toward translating their research findings and recommendations from "academese" into more accessible language—terms that would make busy legislators, harried staffers, and skeptical citizens stop and take notice. He also cleverly advised that we replace our photocopied, black-and-white handouts with a glossy "overview" document combining text and images in a colorful, attractive way. The document attracted attention when we distributed it at the Capitol and reinforced the impact of the students' verbal

comments. The students, in turn, were much better prepared to communicate effectively this time, thanks to their work with David. Ian spoke to a boisterous and appreciative crowd at Hispanic-Latino Legislative Day. The bilingual students ducked into stairwells to huddle with reporters from Spanish-language media outlets. Kevin McNellis, a student who had examined financial trends in Latino higher education, even provided expert testimony in a committee hearing.

That spring we also got our first taste of how making CBR public could generate boomerang effects on our own institution, revealing Whitman's participation in the dynamics of racial inequality. With our school district partners, Diana and Bill Erickson, the students led a pair of workshops at the annual convention of the Latino/a Educational Achievement Project in Tacoma. This event put our students in touch with scores of Latino youth who were striving to realize their ambitions of going to college, often as the first ones in their families. At the same time, it raised (publicly) the issues of Whitman's very low racial minority student enrollment and its reputation among Latino "townies" as inaccessible and unwelcoming. The Ericksons had shepherded a group of some two dozen Latino students from Walla Walla High School to the conference. These "Wa-Hi" kids attended our workshops, and said frankly that they had never even considered applying to Whitman. Yet it was evident they were starting to think about Whitman, and about college in general, in new ways when my students personally urged them to apply, and when the high schoolers saw how college-level CBR work could involve them further in their communities of origin rather than severing those ties. The exorbitant cost of a private education at Whitman was, of course, the elephant in the room—actually, a pachyderm in plain view thanks to Kevin's remarks on the changing cost structure of higher education. Kevin's research had argued for tackling the sociocultural barriers to minority college enrollment (e.g., lack of information and motivation) through policy initiatives like Talent Search and other federal programs to facilitate higher education attainment by first-generation college students. At the same time, he stressed the limited effects of such policies given the wider, troubling trend of student loans replacing grants while tuition rates explode. Our experience at the Latino/a Educational Achievement Project conference confirmed, live and in person, this diagnosis of the obstacles to increasing Latino participation in higher education.

## Public Work, "Tabling," and Race Talk

Documenting, analyzing, and addressing the extremely low electoral participation and political representation of Latinos in Washington State had been at the core of our project since its inception. Thus when another major election year came around in January 2008, I decided we should lay aside, temporarily, our ambition to research a wide gamut of issues and concentrate on voting rights and political mobilization. Simplifying the structure of our community partnerships was a must, and so with Joaquin's help I made contact with the regional chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and arranged for them to join Joaquin as one of only two partnerships that semester. With students working on closely related projects and multiple students per partner, I could standardize the research methodologies as well as the methods training. This not only made the teaching easier for me but also enhanced the reliability of our findings when we brought them to the public. Joaquin and LULAC targeted four local areas in the eastern, heavily Latino part of Washington State. For each area, one student analyzed local elections and voting behavior, explored whether a shift from at-large to district-based elections would improve Latino representation, and analyzed the availability of bilingual election materials. Meanwhile, another student investigated both formal organizations and informal community networks to assess and explain the levels of Latino civic engagement for each location. Joaquin came to campus and led a "boot camp" in VRA analyses for the voting rights researchers. Gilbert Mireles, a colleague in sociology with whom I co-taught the course that spring, and I trained the political mobilization researchers to conduct interviews and analyze organizational capacities, since these were the methods of choice in our own scholarly endeavors. Thus we prepared the student investigators to produce research that would be as empirically rigorous as it was topical.

Overall, in 2008, the State of the State for Washington Latinos solidified into a long-term commitment with a durable academic, financial, and community scaffolding. At Whitman, the project had gained a reputation as a challenge meant for only the most motivated, students. Enrollments were limited (averaging 11 per semester), and those who signed up were a tough, self-selected bunch who were both willing to do the work and capable of pulling it off. I had developed relationships with other faculty members and staff whose help was essential to handle research methods training beyond my capabilities (e.g., statistics) as well as logistical tasks (e.g., planning public meetings). Beginning in the fall 2008

semester, moreover, what was once a single course was expanded into a two-semester course sequence. This allowed for more extensive public outreach, and made student participation in these activities something they did for credit rather than just a volunteer effort. It also allowed me to enrich the academic component by anchoring outreach activities in critical discussions of democratic theory and public communication in a political culture increasingly allergic to discussing racial inequality.

The financial basis of the State of the State project also improved dramatically in 2008, and this helped bring the public side of the project into full bloom. As far back as my experiences with Local 556, my approach to community-based research had been informed by Harry C. Boyte and James Farr's *(1997)* notion that service-learning ought to be seen as a form of "public work": labor done in public, for public purposes, and by a group of students and community members acting in reciprocal ways to identify and solve public problems as a "public." At the same time, democratic theorist Romand Coles *(2005)* has argued that convening these "publics" in a society rent by racial and class domination cannot mean just inviting different groups to have "a seat at the table." All too often, this burdens people from underprivileged quarters with the job of going where White people with power and money say they should go to tell their stories. Instead, urges Coles, communicative democratic action requires going "tabling" —literally moving the "table" where people gather to do public work into multiple, varied cultural-spatial locations rather than, say, expecting everyone to get on the bus to the state capital *(2005, pp. 213–238)*.

But "tabling," in this sense, takes money. Fortunately, we were able to access the new resources we needed: In 2008, we began receiving funding from Princeton University's National Community-Based Research Networking Initiative, which was administering a 3-year federal Learn & Serve grant to promote community-based research. What set us apart from other schools in the nationwide competition and snared us an "innovation sub-grant" worth $7,500 a year for 3 years (matched at 50% by Whitman) was our unusual emphasis on public outreach as well as our goal of having an impact on public policy. With the help of these funds, spring 2009 turned out to be harvest time for the public outreach side of the project, and the yield was abundant. During our next trip to Olympia, students not only testified in legislative committees—a committee staffer asked one student to draft a bill on electoral reform, and another student was invited to serve on a gubernatorial health policy task force. A public meeting

in Seattle hosted by the interracial/ethnic Minority Executive Directors' Collection finally made good on the potential we had always known was there to link with organizations in the state's urban center, and to put our work in dialogue with the concerns of other minority groups. Our website went bilingual. And at the community college in Walla Walla, we created an exhibition with Pedro de Valdivia, a talented young artist who had done a series of vibrant paintings for our project. The exhibition opened with a Cinco de Mayo public event, in a packed auditorium, where my students used Pedro's images as points of departure for introducing questions and findings from the research.

All this gave me a tremendous emotional charge, which intensified as I saw my students stretch themselves as scholars, come into their own as communicators, and become increasingly thoughtful about the racial differences and interactions among themselves—and they spurred me to try to do likewise. I watched them wean themselves off their prepared remarks, becoming more spontaneous and lively as they spoke to continually shifting audiences. The crowning moment came when they decided on their own, before a May public meeting with Chicano Studies students and faculty at Yakima Valley Community College, to chuck their notes and speak entirely off the cuff. Of course, the levels of energy and conviction they conveyed roughly doubled. They were jubilant at what they had accomplished, and I marveled at how they had matured not only as public speakers but also in two other ways: as intellectuals, who were able to bend their minds in new directions and keep learning as they listened to people respond to their work; and as exemplars of the personal effort required to fight racism, as they attentively listened to one another, riffed off one another's ideas, and performed in person the values of racial equality and reciprocity their research promoted.

It bears emphasis, however, that this last achievement took real, intentional effort. It also involved a process in which the roles of educator and student were, to a significant degree, reversed. Over the years I had made only a few sporadic attempts to call attention to the racial dynamics within our group, which typically included a small cohort of Latino students, some other students of color, and an equal or greater number of White students. I finally saw the need to do this more deliberately, however, when I saw how our public face at key events might subvert our message of racial equality. I had been leaving it to the students to decide who among them would speak for the various research groups, and in what order. When the students lined up to present to the mostly Spanish-speaking and

almost entirely Latino crowd at Hispanic-Latino Legislative Day, I realized to my dismay that we had three White students (none of whom spoke Spanish) presenting while a Latina student assisted them by translating (but did not speak about her research). It was only too obvious what we were implying about whose intellectual work mattered most, and who was more suited to offer technical support. Faced with yet another challenge that took them outside their comfort zone, the students once again rose to the occasion and pondered the racial dynamics among themselves, both within and beyond the public eye. Their consensus: that audiences needed not only to hear them critically analyze problems of racial inequality, but also to see them self-reflectively, visibly model an endeavor of interracial cooperation. Ultimately, the students were more confident about addressing these questions of racial dynamics than I had been, and they helped me become more willing and confident about confronting these important matters.

## Impatience, and the Arc of the Moral Universe

When I think about the public outreach activities my students and I carried out in 2008–2009, I feel an abiding sense of wonder and deep satisfaction at all that we did – and this sensation has only grown in the years since then as our efforts have yielded an accelerating series of concrete impacts. In the winter of 2012, five years after The Warner Report touched off electoral reform in Sunnyside, Washington, and following several more studies on voting rights, two of my students took the microphone to deliver expert testimony in hotly anticipated state legislative committee hearings on a newly proposed Washington Voting Rights Act. The Act would allow lawsuits in state courts to compel municipalities to shift from at-large to district elections, if conditions existed like those Ian Warner had found in Sunnyside. Although it narrowly missed eventually coming to a floor vote in both chambers, the Act startled everyone by making it that far through the process and remains on state lawmakers' agenda today – and State of the State research was indispensable to justifying reforms of this sort. Several months later, a consortium of Northwest public radio stations borrowed our research methods and extended our study of low Latino representation rates in ten Washington counties across the entire territory of Washington, Idaho and Oregon. The multi-part broadcast series they produced brought an unprecedented level and breadth of public attention to the problem.

I routinely receive indications from people in many parts of the state who are aware of our program that the research has pen-

etrated diverse quarters, and that it is exerting positive and sometimes striking effects. There is a feeling around Washington State these days that the Latino community is getting mobilized politically, and that the racially dominant population is paying more attention. The annual Hispanic-Latino Legislative Day not only has become a regular, well-attended event but also has spurred the formation of a new coalition called the Latino Civic Alliance. In 2006, large and unprecedented immigrant rights protests, as in so many other places across the country, broke out in cities and small towns all over Washington State. Although labor activism has been nonexistent at the Tyson plant since the company quashed the union in 2005, farm workers have built union movements at eastern Washington dairies, in the berry fields of teh Skagit Valley, and in nearby towns in northeastern Oregon. In 2010, more Latinos ran for the Washington state legislature than ever before, although too few prevailed.

The State of the State program has helped gradually shift the political culture so that it allows the seeds of all these activities to germinate. Our trips to Olympia have reaffirmed the sense among policy professionals that the issues identified as important by the Latino community need to be taken seriously. We have contributed in modest but concrete ways to the knowledge bases and public reputations of our long-term partners. (Our collaborator at the Washington State Farmworker Housing Trust, organizer Rosalinda Mendoza, a Whitman grad who researched juvenile justice problems in the first State of the State group, told me they regularly consulted a student's 2009 report on vineyard workers' labor conditions in the region that wine enthusiasts call "the new Napa.") When throngs of Wa-Hi and middle school youth walked out of class in the heady immigrants' rights actions of 2006, students from the State of the State program coordinated public events. In 2009, my student Pedro Galvao, who had investigated the near-total lack of Latino elected officials in Walla Walla, got over 200 people to turn out for a workshop on political involvement that the organization he founded with Latino community members, El Proyecto Voz Latina, conducted at a Catholic church.

As spring arrived in 2010, a few State of the State veterans came over to my house to have dinner and talk about the future of the program. They all agreed that in terms of students' experiences, the project has been an almost unqualified success. Although they unanimously considered the workload in the research semester to be extreme, to the point of being almost unmanageable, they confirmed that students emerged from the project with vastly forti-

fied capacities as scholars, and as present and future public leaders. The roster of Whitman graduates who have gone on to public service–oriented careers shaped by their State of the State experiences is growing long. Danielle Alvarado, who wrote the controversial 2005 report on Head Start, became an organizer for No More Deaths/No Más Muertes near the Arizona-Sonora border. Estela Vasquez, who as a junior had joined Governor Gregoire's task force on health disparities after analyzing the stress and frustration of Latino kids at Wa-Hi, entered a doctoral program to investigate racial inequality. It isn't just knowing about these post-Whitman developments that makes me believe what the ones who visited my house that evening said about the program's profound effects on students. Even more, it's the accumulating pile of notes and cards I get from them, sometimes well after they graduate, referring back to the project and using phrases like "life changing." Meanwhile, largely as a result of these students' achievements and my own protracted nudging of Whitman administrators, the college now more actively affirms curricular civic engagement projects like mine as institutional priorities. A plan to open a new center for civic engagement focused on academic projects—"public work," not just volunteer work—is now on the agendas of the president and the provost. Our vice president for development agreed to include an appeal for community-based learning in the capital campaign that was launched in late 2011. It wasn't long before a major donation materialized, courtesy of a college overseer who was astonished at the poise, knowledge and conviction the students had presented at a public forum he attended.

I still feel, however, that we have only begun to realize our project's potential to have a public impact and to produce results that will be of lasting benefit to our partner organizations. Here in Walla Walla, 2012 was a breakthrough year for our partnership with the school district. District leaders at last responded to the accumulated weight of seven years worth of research showing the need to expand dual-language programs throughout the schools, hire more Latino teachers, and train teachers and staff in cultural competency. The superintendent convened a Diversity Committee bringing together District leaders and concerned individuals in the community, and spotlighted the 2012 State of the State research at the two initial meetings – such that our research effectively set the agenda for diversity initiatives at the highest levels of school district leadership. Now, we need to ensure that there is real follow-through on this laudable agenda. Similarly, our research partnerships with the statewide immigrant advocacy group Other research partner-

ships have demonstrated the damages to community-police relations from federal efforts to get local jails to help detain and deport immigrants, as well as the need for vastly increased immigration services funding if and when Congress passes Comprehensive Immigration Reform. Now the challenge looms of persuading officials at local, state and even federal levels to take these findings seriously and change public policy.

Odd as it might seem for someone like me who chose a career in academia over long-term work in the political world, I am impatient to see change happen. I re-read and teach Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" just about every year, and the message of what he called "the fierce urgency of the now" strikes me to my core every time. So does his frustration with well-meaning liberals who kept counseling him: "Wait!" As King observed, for African Americans, "This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see . . . that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied'" *(1986, p. 88)*. This is where things stand for Latinos today in the Pacific Northwest, as well as, of course, for many other racial minority groups who populate our region.

King also knew, however, that large-scale change requires a multitude of smaller-scale shifts accumulating over time. Several years after writing his famous letter, King spoke at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and declared that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" *(1986, p. 179)*. Recently, I have learned how that long-term view, and the discipline and persistence it bespeaks, informs the work of a remarkable western Oregon farmworkers' organization, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste/Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN). This organization's orientation reflects the spirit of King and offers a valuable perspective on what the future of the State of the State project may hold.

I first met PCUN's leaders when we collaborated on the 2003 Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, along with Teamsters Local 556.(3) Over more than two decades, PCUN has patiently built a local culture of empowerment among severely marginalized Oaxacan migrants in the Willamette Valley. The organization's dynamic secretary-treasurer Larry Kleinman *(2011)* explains the group's approach to organizing:

> We consider it short-sighted to struggle for institutional change. Rather, we must build a movement which can sustain and defend that change. Therefore, we are guided by the notion that achieving deep, broad and

lasting change requires building and reinforcing a broad base.

Our experiences since 2005 have shown that pushing back against the wall of racism, even for people whose social marginality is not so extreme, poses massive, long-range challenges. Thinking about this helps me put my impatience in perspective, although I would never want to let go of it. It leads me to hope that our public work in the State of the State program can continue helping to form that broad base for lasting change in our region—with community organizations, in the policy-making process, in public opinion, and among an intellectually formidable and socially committed cohort of young leaders.

## Endnotes

1. Whitman College is a liberal arts college located in the town of Walla Walla in eastern Washington State. Whitman was founded in 1882 and is one of the premier liberal arts institutions in the northwestern United States. It is exclusively an undergraduate institution, with approximately 1,500 students and about 160 faculty members.

2. Whitman's mission statement employs a few keywords, uch as teaching students "leadership," "responsibility," and the capacity to "engage," that evoke a vague sense of civic responsibility. But as a Princeton alum who takes seriously that institution's motto of acting "in the nation's service and in the service of all nations," and as someone married to a graduate of Oberlin, with its official commitments to "nurture students' social consciousness" and to foster "social justice," I have always wanted to see Whitman make its concern for social responsibility more coherent and emphatic.

3. The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride sent two busloads of immigrant workers from Seattle and Portland across the country to Washington, D.C., where they joined buses from eight other major cities to advocate for immigrant workers' rights.

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## About the Author

**Paul Apostolidis** is professor of politics and holds the Judge & Mrs. Timothy A. Paul Chair of Political Science at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. His research and teaching areas include critical social and political theory, labor studies, immigration, cultural studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, Latino politics, religion and politics, and critical media studies. Professor Apostolidis received his Ph.D. and M.A. from Cornell University and his A.B. from Princeton University. He is also the founder and director of Whitman's nationally recognized community-based research program on the State of the State for Washington Latinos (www.walatinos.org).