

## **Mariachi Music as a Pathway to Higher Education in the United States**

Considered the national musical symbol of Mexico, mariachi music has become a transnational genre that is now popular worldwide. In 2012, mariachi music made UNESCO'S Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which helped to launch the first mariachi school in Mexico City. However, in the United States, the popularity of mariachi music since the 1960s has given rise to the following American innovations that have had a deep impact on the development of the tradition: the academic mariachi movement, the rise of mariachi festivals, and the fledgling sheet music/method book publishing industry. Inextricably linked to education and diversity, each aspect of the American mariachi tradition represents a unique way in which this traditional musical art form can be understood as a model for community empowerment.

Latino's comprise the largest growing segment of the American population; however, in terms of education, they have a long history of poor academic achievement, high drop-out rates in high schools, and poor college retention (PEW Research Center).<sup>1</sup> Academic mariachi programs in high schools have been shown to have positive outcomes for Latino students in terms of improved graduation rates and higher grades by helping to make school culturally relevant (Salazar 2011:158). In keeping with the Texas Tech Vernacular Music Center's mission which includes "research, teaching, and advocacy," the mariachi ensemble also aims to serve the larger community by creating a formal pipeline between the local high school mariachi program at Lubbock High School and the Texas Tech Vernacular Music Center which is a part of the School of Music at Texas Tech University. This paper will explore the process and challenges involved in creating a dual enrollment program in which mariachi serves as a direct pathway to higher education for students who typically would not pursue a college degree.

### **Brief Background**

The American academic mariachi movement has its roots in the 1960s Chicano Civil Rights Movement<sup>2</sup> and the Bilingual Education Act (Pérez 2002:145) – resulting in an effort to create culturally relevant curricula for Latino students.<sup>3</sup> In 1961, the University of California, Los Angeles, within the Institute of Ethnomusicology, established the first academic mariachi program. Many of the early participants were not of Mexican descent, and music performance was the group's primary focus. The goals of civic engagement and social empowerment, which are prevalent themes in today's mariachi programs, were not a motivating factor for the group at that time. It is important to note that several participants went on to found programs of their own, which in turn produced other students, who then went on to found their own programs. With the success of the UCLA mariachi program, other programs were created at the high school level in Los Angeles (151). By the 1990s, the proliferation of mariachi programs at the K-12 levels grew

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/24/more-hispanics-blacks-enrolling-in-college-but-lag-in-bachelors-degrees/>

<sup>2</sup> The term Chicano generally refers to Mexican-Americans, however, more Latino's of other backgrounds also may refer to themselves as Chicanos.

<sup>3</sup> The term Chicano generally refers to Mexican-Americans, however, more Latino's of other backgrounds also may refer to themselves as Chicanos.

as more Latino's on school boards demanded programs for their students. Today, academic mariachi programs can be found in areas where there is a large Latino diaspora.<sup>4</sup> As more school districts establish formal mariachi programs, issues such as teaching materials (method books and sheet music), access to instruments and uniforms, and the most challenging of all – qualified teachers – will become more important. In light of the issues surrounding teacher qualifications and credentials, it is clear that there is a growing demand for more universities to start offering comprehensive mariachi education programs. Degree programs that offer teacher certification opportunities would help meet the demand for qualified mariachi instructors.

The main problem, however, is the actual development of these programs. This is an opportunity in which a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. Ethnomusicologists, music educators, and professional mariachis working together will, in my opinion, help to create comprehensive programs. To try to mitigate the challenges I have described, organizations such as National Association for Music Educators (NAfME) and the Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) have created special committees to identify the issues and come up with viable solutions. Additionally, at the higher education level, some schools like the University of North Texas, Texas State University, and University of Texas – Rio Valley Grande, have established certification programs and in some cases are in the process of creating degree programs for mariachi.

Additionally, through persuasive anecdotal evidence at the K-12 levels, these programs are seen to curb absenteeism, boost academic achievement, and most importantly, increase graduation rates. In Texas, many school districts offer mariachi classes during the school day as part of the music education curriculum. Many of these programs produce highly skilled musicians who wish to continue their studies at a higher level. Therefore, it is crucial that universities create mariachi programs to serve this demand and to keep these students in school earning degrees. In the next section, I will discuss the mariachi program at Texas Tech University.

### **Mariachi at Texas Tech University**

Census results from 2010 have confirmed a trend that has been developing in the United States for the last thirty years. Latinos are among the youngest and fastest growing ethnic groups in the country. The census results also show that the Latino population is growing in cities in the Midwest and Southern United States (Census 2010). However, as the population continues to increase, and despite thirty years of educational reforms, Latino students continue to lag behind other groups. Due to low expectations, poverty, and possible language barriers, Latinos, particularly Mexican-Americans, are plagued with low academic achievement and high high-school dropout rates (Torres and de la Torre 1997:100). Access to higher education and degree completion are among of the biggest challenges facing the ever-growing Latino community in the United States. Recent statistics show that while more Latinos are enrolling in college programs there is a significant lag in the actual completion of the bachelor's degree (PEW Research Center).<sup>5</sup> In order to insure Latino student success, it is vital that universities

---

<sup>4</sup> Academic mariachi programs can be found in the following states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, New York, Michigan, Texas, and others.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/24/more-hispanics-blacks-enrolling-in-college-but-lag-in-bachelors-degrees/>

implement academic and cultural programs, like mariachi, to engage and support marginalized students.

My faculty colleague, Thomas Cimarusti, founded mariachi Los Matadores de Texas Tech in 2010 as part of a World Music Ensemble class “Tzumba”. In 2013, my first year at TTU, I began directing the ensemble and have taken it in a more academic direction while still keeping the performance standards high. I focus on history, music theory as it applies to the mariachi tradition, performance style and practice, in addition to exposing my students to the vast mariachi repertoire. Furthermore, Latino academic student success, recruitment, and retention are important goals for the mariachi program at TTU. This program serves as a cultural bridge between the Latino community in Lubbock and the university.

In June 14-19, 2015, TTU hosted its first mariachi camp, which aims to build a formal pipeline between the university and nearby high schools. In this way, mariachi programs serve as a pathway to higher education for students. The students of Texas Tech mariachi ensemble serve as camp counselors, so in addition to the high school students physically being on the college campus, they are interacting with successful college students who function as role models. This camp is unique in that it emphasizes college readiness through actual college-style lectures on mariachi history and theory, as well as presentations on the college application process and how to apply for financial aid and programs offered on campus at no additional cost.

During the year, I cultivate a close relationship with the mariachi program at Lubbock High School by inviting the group to participate in the Texas Tech performances on-campus and by going once a month to their class and giving a presentation or coaching them on a song. Their director Gregorio Cavazos and I believe strongly that mariachi programs utilized effectively can create a pathway for Latino students to higher education. For many of the high school students, performing at TTU is their first time on campus and in most cases, I am the first college professor they have ever met. These efforts help to create a safe space where college becomes an attainable goal. Although these are only the first steps to creating a comprehensive pipeline – future goals include creating a formal program in which high school students are able, through dual enrollment, take the mariachi class at TTU for both high school and college credit. Overall, there is high potential for the recruitment and retention of Latino students through mariachi programs at both the high school and college levels. It is in the best interest for educators to explore possibilities for using traditional arts to create opportunities especially within marginalized communities.

## Works Cited

- Pérez, Leonor Xóchitl. 2002. "Transgressing the Taboo: A Chicana's Voice in the Mariachi World." In *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, edited by Norma E. Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez. 143-166. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Salazar, Lauryn. 2011. "From Fiesta to Festival: Mariachi Music in California and the Southwestern United States." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Torres, Rodolfo D. and Adela de la Torre. 1997. "Latinos, Class, and the U.S. Political Economy: Income Inequality and Policy Alternatives." In *Latinos and Education*, edited by Antonia Darder, Rodolfo D. Torres and Henry Gutiérrez, 95-111. New York: Routledge.

