

# The Tri-County

# News

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## Local Latinos are focus of project

*Immigrants get attention from UO researchers*

**By CATALINA VAZQUEZ**  
**Of the News**

JUNCTION CITY - The growing Latino immigrant population in the Tri-County area is not going unnoticed. In fact, you may be getting a phone call soon.

The Gender, Families and Immigration in the Northwest project, which runs out of the University of Oregon, hopes to assess what it is that immigrant people have and don't have as they transition into U.S. life. The program then plans to share that information with relevant policy makers, social service providers and immigrant rights advocates.

"The families are here, we need to talk about what [civil] society is doing to welcome them," said

Marcela Mendoza, co-founder of the research project.

Researchers will focus their work on economic, social and civic integration of Latino immigrants. They plan to gauge that by talking with various stakeholders in the Tri-County area. Their first phase involves interviews, hence the possible phone calls. Researchers with the project will start in Junction City, then move on to Harrisburg, followed by Monroe.

Mendoza, who has done similar research at the University of Memphis in Tennessee, said that growing Latino immigrant communities in rural Oregon are new and provide an opportunity for dialogue with both Latino immigrants and non-Latino community members. That conversation can lead to what she terms "positive results."

Integration is about talking to people and letting them know what is expected of them, said Mendoza.

"People don't know that they

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need to ask for permits or that there is a curfew for youth," she said. "It's not self-evident to a first-generation person from another country."

The research project isn't the only effort being made in the area to support new Latino immigrants.

Both Junction City and Monroe public libraries have increased Spanish reading materials. Junction City Library went as far as buying "Ingles Sin Barreras (English without barriers)." It's a popular English learning program for Spanish speakers, but it isn't very affordable for working-class immigrant people.

The libraries also have increased their Spanish children's book collection and are now looking toward more Spanish reading material for adults.

Lynn Frost, Junction City librarian, thinks that it's important to try to understand different cultures. She herself has been a foreigner in other countries and has an idea of what it's like to be on the other end. At the Junction City Library, she'll do "anything to facilitate both language acquisition as well as community understanding."

Frost may have succeeded. Long time library patron, Joel Melendez, originally from Lima, Peru, said he consistently uses the English learning program that the library offers. He thinks it's helping him with his conversational skills.

"Tengo un amigo Americano y aveces vamos a almorsar. El practica su Espanol, yo el ingles (I have an American friend. We sometimes go out to lunch, and he practices his Spanish while I get to practice my English)," said Melendez.

In addition to public libraries making an effort for the growing needs of the Latino immigrant

community, schools are recognizing students with different language needs.

Laurel Elementary School, in Junction City, is now one of many schools that offer an English Language Development program — an approach that supports students learning English as a second, or even third, language.

"This is also the first year that [Oregon] districts are required to have ELD textbooks and materials," said Ana Maria Vergara, a teacher at Laurel for eight years. "At Laurel, we bought a program called 'Into English.'"

Such resources available, or not available, to Latino immigrants while they transition into local communities are exactly what the

*'People don't always like their new neighbors, but we need to record it, then address it.'*

- Marcela Mendoza

Gender, Families and Immigration in the Northwest project research will look at. The data gathered during the first phase of the project's research will provide a picture of how Latino immigrants are received by the broader community, as well as what kind of space the immigrant community carves out for itself.

The information gathered during the research is not meant to sit in a book collecting dust. It will be made available to policy-makers, who will be invited to work with researchers in finding significant implications. Longer-term, cross-cultural learning possibilities may follow.

What makes the project unique is that it not only provides space to understand what the transition is like for immigrant communities, but non-immigrant people, as well.

"People don't always like their new neighbors, but we need to record it, then address it," said Mendoza.

With Latino immigrants reach-

ing 10 percent of the general population in the Tri County area, people are paying attention.

The research project is working on funding for its work. Regardless, researchers will be out in the area gathering information in the next few months. In the meantime, other key players do what they can.

"We've been working on getting some grant money to increase public resources," said David Clyne, Junction City Administrator.

When asked why Junction City resources are being put into welcoming immigrant communities, Clyne offered a position similar to that of Mendoza's.

"They are part of our community," he said. "Productive members, as far as I know, and they have the right to be here along with everybody else."