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Field Museum to Study Social, Cultural, Artistic Resources and Achievements of Chicago's Recent Mexican Immigrants

'Asset Mapping' Research Collaborates With University of Illinois

Distribution Source : PRNewswire

Date : Tuesday - March 01, 2005

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CHICAGO, March 1 /PRNewswire/ – How do art, music and culture contribute to the lives and communities of recent Mexican immigrants, both in Chicago and in their communities of origin?

A new \$100,000 grant from The Rockefeller Foundation for a one-year ethnographic study and network analysis will answer that question.

"We will identify the social assets that recent Mexican immigrants can draw on and, ultimately, contribute to their survival, security and celebration," says Alaka Wali, Director of the Center for Cultural Understanding (CCUC) at The Field Museum, John Nuveen Curator of Anthropology, and Principal Investigator of this study. "We will also identify these assets and show how they contribute to the maintenance and innovation of cultural practices, some of which are rooted in communities located in Chicago and Mexico."

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As the number of Mexican immigrants to Chicago has increased, much attention has been paid to quantitative measures of their presence in and impact on Chicago. This study measures such as the nature of identity formation, building strategies, and the creative potential of

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Understanding such forces will help government and social service organizations formulate better programs that build on the successes and resources of Mexican immigrants, both artistically and economically.

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Earlier immigrants tended to settle in Chicago permanently, but many Mexican immigrants are transnationals, or frequently living with one foot in each country. How do transnationality stretch family networks? How do these associations function to maintain social ties in Mexico? How do Mexican immigrants use public rituals, festivals and gatherings to improve their quality of life?

"Humans beings are successful because of our diversity," says Rebecca Severson, Manager of Urban Research Programs at The Field Museum, and Co-Investigator of this study. "Unfortunately, however, we are losing much of that diversity. This work will help identify ways Chicago's Mexican immigrants can draw on their distinctive cultural and artistic practices while they begin to live and work in the U.S."

How the study will be conducted

The grant, awarded in January, will allow for a series of focus groups to identify broad issues and locations where research will be conducted – anything from churches to playgrounds and community centers to cafes. Research will focus on Chicago, a north side Chicago neighborhood, and one suburban location yet to be determined.

Next, six bi-lingual, graduate-level researchers will conduct field work from March to August, interviewing and photographing events and participating in activities, such as church services, political meetings, and neighborhood events. They will combine CCUC's asset mapping approach with network asset mapping exercise, an innovative technique developed by the Team Engineering Collaboratory at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Principal Investigator, Professor of Speech Communication Psychology and Coordinated Science LAB, developed this methodology for analyzing immigrant networks.

Ultimately, the team will analyze the collected data and produce a multi-media research report, incorporating audio documentation with the network graphs and asset maps. Asset maps are a powerful way to analyze

"In the end, we will understand better how artistic and cultural activities are embedded in the lives of Chicago immigrants and how they are related to earlier immigrants as well as society, at large," Wali says.

Field Museum

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