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Making Americans

UNO Charter Schools and Civic Education

By David Feith

This policy brief is the third in a series of in-depth case studies exploring how top-performing charter schools have incorporated civic learning in their school curriculum and school culture. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit www.citizenship-aei.org.

On a mid-September weekend in 2011, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times* ran two starkly contrasting stories. The front page of the *Tribune* reported on some 1,200 Chicago public-school students commemorating the 10th anniversary of 9/11 by organizing public memorials and honoring local police and firefighters.[1] The *Sun-Times*, meanwhile, brought word of activists in Massachusetts pushing to ban the Pledge of Allegiance from public-school classrooms, lest students suffer undue thought control.[2]

This juxtaposition is invoked by Juan Rangel, CEO of the UNO Charter School Network, with a purposeful mix of pride and exasperation. Pride, because UNO's students—almost all children of immigrants from Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America—were those who made page one for commemorating 9/11. And exasperation because the worldview manifested by the Massachusetts campaign represents so much of what UNO tries to fight.

"This is part of the problem we have in our country," Rangel says of the anti-Pledge drive. "And you take that, and multiply it with the challenges of an immigrant community that doesn't have its feet clearly cemented in our country, and it leaves people in limbo. I think we have a responsibility as an institution to help transform that community."[3]

The UNO Mission

The UNO Charter School Network includes 13 schools serving some 6,500 students across Chicago. Located in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods, the network's 12 K–8 schools and one high school serve a student body that is 95 percent Hispanic. Roughly 30 percent of students have limited English proficiency, and more than 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Modeled on the "no-excuses" charter schools that have achieved national prominence over the past 15 years and the urban Catholic schools that for decades have taught many Hispanic immigrants and their children, UNO's schools stress discipline (including uniforms and a signed contract between students, parents, and teachers); a school day and year longer than the district average, extending 7.5 hours daily from early August to late June; high expectations of student academic performance, including admission to magnet and selective-enrollment high schools and universal college attendance; the use of testing and data to measure student and teacher performance; and the autonomy to set curriculum, hire and fire teachers, and otherwise administer the school free of a teachers union contract and most school district regulations.

The UNO Charter School Network is part of the United Neighborhood Organization, a community group that dates back to 1984 and stakes a claim to leadership in the Hispanic community writ large, including K–12 education, but extending far beyond, too. The school network launched in 1998 and now accounts for almost all of the umbrella organization's attention and resources; however, UNO also serves Chicago's Hispanic community through training programs for young professionals (such as the Metropolitan Leadership Institute) and political advocacy.

Rangel, the organization's CEO, served as co-chair of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's 2011 campaign, and UNO maintains relationships with aldermen across the city and legislators in the state's capital, many of whom attend public events at the network. In 2009, UNO

received $98 million from Illinois to construct new schools in overcrowded neighborhoods, the state's largest-ever grant to a charter network.[4] With most of the money expected to be dispersed by the end of 2013, UNO is set to become one of the two largest charter operators in Illinois, and the nation's largest with such a focus on the Hispanic community.

For years, the UNO network has consistently outperformed the Chicago Public Schools average on state standardized tests and the ACT.[5] But what distinguishes UNO most is its worldview—namely, what it considers the mindset, knowledge, and skills necessary for Hispanics to thrive in America. This is the *raison d'être* of the school network.

UNO fundamentally understands citizenship education as a project of assimilation and Americanization. Rangel writes in his published "Message from the CEO":

> As our nation wrestles with the questions brought about by today's massive immigration from Latin America, UNO has taken the lead in developing a model toward the successful integration of Hispanic children and their families into broader American society. Key to this model is understanding the role that public schools play, not only in educating our youth, but also in serving as THE mediating institution to transition immigrant families into successful Americans. Although there is no such national effort today, UNO believes that all American public schools in immigrant communities ought to serve such a purpose, as they once did.[6]

As UNO sees it, standing for assimilation and Americanization requires standing against certain popular ideas in contemporary culture and pedagogy. First is a multiculturalism that stresses differences over commonalities. The network's American Civics Curriculum, last updated in 2011, is what the network calls "A School Curriculum for Immigrant Assimilation" that "builds upon the immigrant experience and gives recognition to the ideal set forth on the Great Seal of the United States of America, *E Pluribus Unum*: Out of many, one."[7] A crucial part of this work is inculcating a positive sense of that unum and of life in America—one worthy of optimistic, patriotic gratitude. The schools aim to empower Hispanic immigrants by equipping them for "a political system that they regard as legitimate and admirable," explains Peter Skerry, a political scientist at Boston College and former UNO board member.[8]

Second is the idea that the Hispanic community has been victimized by an American system that owes it recourse. "The nation's largest drop-out rate, gang violence, and teenage pregnancy, among other problems, have for decades created a rift between Hispanic potential and accomplishment," says UNO in its published "Vision of the Hispanic Community." "Even so, practical solutions to these problems are rarely put forth. Rather, pragmatism plays second to politically-expedient and media-driven agendas that benefit by portraying Hispanics as a victimized community in need of social justice."[9] Rangel argues that it is mistaken to model Hispanic community groups on the African American civil rights movement. Hispanics' "struggles are different. Their struggles come from a desire to get ahead and leaving their nation and coming to a new land. And those are tough things, but there's no way that you can compare that struggle to the struggles of slavery and Jim Crow and Reconstruction. There's just no comparison."[10]

UNO fundamentally understands citizenship education as a project of assimilation and Americanization.

Another popular but unhelpful idea, in UNO's view, is that schools should prepare students for global, not national, citizenship. "We live as a global society, and I think that people often take that to the extreme of somehow suggesting we're citizens of the world, we're global citizens," says Rangel. "Yes, in some respects we are. But we are also citizens of a nation, a sovereign nation. And if its citizens don't feel ownership for that nation, well then we have a bigger problem." Hence UNO's dedication, in Rangel's words, to creating "not just educated and engaged citizens, but educated and engaged *American* citizens. That was the whole purpose of the public school system. We were a new nation and we needed to help develop Americans. That's an important aspect of the public schools that somehow we've lost sight of."

Assimilation Unpacked

UNO's creed emphasizes the practical. As Rangel's "Message from the CEO" puts it, "UNO believes that full American assimilation is essential for the success of immigrant communities in our nation, especially for its youth."[11] In conversation he notes, "The greatest self-interest that our community has is to get ahead."

This way of thinking flows from UNO's founding as a community group explicitly in the spirit of Chicago

organizing pioneer Saul Alinsky. As Rangel says, "We challenge people to grapple with the concepts that Alinsky, the father of community organizing, identified as central to change: self-interest, power, relationships, and the public arena." Echoing Alinsky, the UNO network's literature on its American Civics Initiative notes that "Immigrant students and their families are particularly prone to slipping through the cracks and finding themselves in isolation. They especially need to be encouraged to become involved in the public sphere where they can build up critical interpersonal networks necessary for advancement."[12]

This approach, explains Boston College's Skerry, follows on earlier immigrant groups that pursued politics based on mutual investment and reciprocity: "That notion of reciprocity held that I have my point of view and I'm listening to your point of view, and we'll work this out. If you want stuff, you have to put skin in the game, become a citizen."

UNO forcefully rejects any suggestion that the Hispanic community's challenges represent any systemic inequity in American life.

There are other ways to get certain "stuff," of course—via what Rangel calls "negative assimilation." He explains that teachers sometimes ask him: "What if our families don't want to assimilate?" His standard response: "They are going to assimilate. The question is what kind of assimilation will they take on? Will it be negative assimilation? When kids become gangbangers and drop out of school, I don't think that's inherent to the Hispanic community, but that's part of an assimilation process."

In other words, there is no such thing as stasis—either it is assimilation via education and civic attachment, or it risks becoming something far worse. "We have to take the bull by the horns and say we'll help guide that assimilation in a positive way," Rangel says. "I feel kids join gangs because they feel they want to belong to something. And we have a responsibility to help them feel that they belong to something greater in society."

That sense of civic belonging is often unlikely to come from students' households. Many Hispanic immigrants "don't come here with the intention of staying," says Rangel, noting that the story of his parents—who moved from Mexico to Brownsville, Texas, in the 1950s before he was born—is representative. "It's not like 100 years ago, when you got on a boat and crossed the ocean. It's a different process today. But the reality is that people do stay. They do have children here, they're born here, and it makes it harder and harder over time to one day decide to go back." And so UNO's job "is to help them realize that here is their future and they need to start planning for that." He argues that "there's no better place for that to happen than the public school."[13]

While UNO deploys many tools in pursuit of this mission, it insists that no part of the job requires rejecting an immigrant's native culture. "These concepts of 'Americanization' and 'assimilation,' which in today's politically correct lexicon are shunned, do not demand the sacrifice of immigrant culture, history, language, and tradition," says Rangel's "Message from the CEO."[14] He adds in conversation:

> This country has thrived on honoring traditions of every ethnic group. We [in Chicago] have the largest population of Polish outside of Warsaw. Strong Irish, strong German communities—parades every weekend honoring every ethnic group. Coming from Chicago, Mexicans are just one more group and we'll honor their way, but not at the expense of building American citizenry.

A central UNO theme is the relationship of today's Hispanic community to the Czechs, Poles, Irish, Jews, and others who successfully immigrated and integrated into American society in earlier eras. At an AEI public event in 2011, Rangel joked that on St. Patrick's Day in Chicago, everyone is Irish, with the river dyed green, and the next great American holiday will be Cinco de Mayo, thanks to the marketing prowess of Corona beer.[15]

Citing accordion music—brought to the United States by Germans and other European immigrants, but preserved today largely by immigrants from Mexico—he celebrates America's "ongoing process" of cultural exchange and mixing. "Some people want to keep people isolated as just Mexican, but no—the beauty of this country is that we adopt all of those things together. . . . We are still one nation." He notes that his childhood church in Chicago's heavily Hispanic Little Village neighborhood was Santa Inés de Bohemia, founded as Blessed Agnes of Bohemia in 1904 when the neighborhood was a hub for Czech immigrants.

It is in this context that UNO forcefully rejects any suggestion that the Hispanic community's challenges represent any systemic inequity in American life. "We do not subscribe to the victimization politics. It doesn't work. It's never worked for any immigration group and it won't

work for this community," Rangel says. Hispanics "come here with very little [and] they understand the hardship, they understand the challenges. But they know one thing—that there's opportunity to get ahead." Otherwise, he quips, there's no explaining their immigration: "I don't think people come here thinking 'Oh, there's going to be a problem, I'm going to be a victim of this nation, so let me cross the border and come here anyway.' . . . People choose to come to this country. They're coming here because they know that it's good."[16]

Individual choice, individual responsibility, and self-confidence are constant themes. UNO subscribes to the "up-by-your-bootstraps strategy," says Rangel, because "it has worked, especially in Chicago. . . . That city knows how to challenge its immigrants to step up, and there's no reason the Mexican community can't do likewise."

Weaving a Civic Fabric

With 13 schools, a staff of 450, 11 buildings, 191 instructional days a year, a charter authorizer to satisfy every five years, and several standardized tests to administer annually, UNO has much to do besides directly Americanizing its students. But in doing all that, the network tries to apply its civic principles as broadly as possible. This begins outside the formal curriculum.

UNO mandates that all students begin each day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, for it and the national anthem "powerfully convey commitment and reverence toward the United States. . . . Especially for immigrant communities, it symbolically helps instill a sense of belonging, membership, and shared purpose as Americans."[17] School rules demand deference to civic protocol: "When reciting the Pledge, all must be standing at attention, facing the flag with the right hand over the heart. Men, not in uniform, should remove any non-religious headdress and hold it with their right hand over their left shoulder, along with the same hand that is over their heart."[18]

UNO explains that this daily routine—so controversial elsewhere—flows simply and directly, indeed necessarily, from the network's core mission: "UNO recognizes that the United States gives its people the right and the opportunity to pursue happiness, a promise that has driven generations of immigrants to this nation. In return, we have an obligation to pledge our loyalty and demonstrate our national unity." As for the Star-Spangled Banner, UNO mandates its singing at all public functions, accompanied by the display of an American flag.[19]

Not limited to special functions or rote daily exercises, civic activities are also primary material from which UNO school leaders design innovative curricular supplements. John Keith, director of UNO's new K–8 school in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood, instructs all homeroom teachers to spend the first months of the school year going through the Pledge of Allegiance with students—"not just to memorize it and say it and be able to recite it, but to ask what does 'to pledge' mean? What is 'allegiance'? If you pledge your allegiance to something or someone, what is that? Why would you do that?" All students consider such questions as they begin the year, "no matter their grade level." The details vary depending on age, but all students "look specifically at some of these overarching beliefs" regarding civic identity and attachment.[20]

You might call this "patriotism"—Rangel certainly does, and his eagerness to do so has a major effect on the tenor of UNO's citizenship education. "There's nothing wrong with flag-waving," he says. "I don't think we do enough of that as an American community. We need to teach to our children that it's ok to be patriotic." Asked to explain why civic education is marginalized or excluded in most American schools, Rangel notes that "an emphasis on reading and math" can crowd out "civics and social studies and those things." But he quickly adds: "I think a bigger factor and a more dangerous factor is the political correctness around patriotism, around love of country. Somehow, people view those things as clichés, not that important." That view, he says, is "more dangerous than the standardized-testing thing that people complain about. We need to reexamine our values as a nation and reexamine whether we have the political will—or just the will—to engender a sense of love of country within our youth. . . . If we don't do it as a nation, who will?"

Consider how UNO names its schools, one of several ways in which the network establishes certain people as heroes and role models—an activity that signals, perhaps more than any other, what principles, causes, and behaviors an institution values.[21] Three UNO schools share the Veterans Memorial Campus on the site of a refurbished former bread factory—now a gleaming glass-and-brick building—in Chicago's Archer Heights neighborhood. Each of the three schools is named in honor of a Hispanic American war hero.

Pfc. Omar E. Torres Charter School (grades K–8) is named for a Chicago native who was killed at age 20 on August 22, 2007, by an improvised explosive device while he was serving in Iraq. Spc. Daniel Zizumbo Charter School (grades K–8) honors another son of Chicago who was killed in action at age 27 on February 27, 2007, while he was serving in Afghanistan. Maj. Hector P. Garcia High School honors a Mexican-born American doctor who fought in World War II and in 1948 founded the

American G.I. Forum to advocate for Mexican American veterans. Portraits of the men hang in the lobbies of their namesake schools, which opened in 2008 with a ceremony at which local Hispanic veterans enjoyed seats of honor surrounded by UNO students and parents holding American flags.

"These are role models for our children—Hispanics who served their country, served their country well, and [in the cases of Torres and Zizumbo] made the ultimate sacrifice for all of us," says Rangel. Another UNO school is named for Donald J. Marquez, a Chicago police officer killed in the line of duty on March 19, 2002, after 20 years on the force. Officer Marquez, says Rangel, "is another individual who grew up in our neighborhoods and who should be seen as a hero serving the greater cause. We have a responsibility to that as well."[22]

UNO also tries to cultivate students' sense of civic responsibility through community service projects and charity drives. Middle-school students must complete 40 hours of community service to earn end-of-year field trips, and an annual drive asks students to support local charities such as Misericordia, which provides for disabled children in the Chicago area.[23] When the Fukushima tsunami hit Japan in March 2011, UNO students contributed thousands of dollars to relief efforts. "They have to learn to give to those that have less than they have," says Rangel. "We're creating a culture where service becomes a norm. It's not a program. It's changing behavior, changing expectations."

Another indirect but crucial aspect of UNO's approach to citizenship education is its emphatic rejection of bilingual education in favor of English immersion. The network stresses the importance of learning English "not only as a means for personal empowerment and successful integration, but to be able to share in a common dialogue with their fellow Americans. There are over 300 languages spoken in the US, but there is one language that unifies us as Americans."[24] Having poor English skills, says Rangel, "not only delays full assimilation for our community, but also denies them full access to American opportunity."[25] All UNO students in grades 6–12 study Spanish, and all high-school students must study four years of Mandarin, but that language study is secondary to mastery of English, "the language that unites Americans and . . . will lead to success for our students."[26]

Experiences in California and elsewhere would seem to confirm UNO's view, as the outlawing of bilingual education quickly yielded improved student outcomes.[27] Yet, in 2011, Illinois began mandating bilingual education for Hispanic preschoolers, and Rangel does not see this pedagogical and political battle going away soon. "No one wants to even challenge [bilingual education] because they're afraid of being called anti-Hispanic, anti-immigrant. That's silly talk to me. It should be about: Has it worked? Show me the proof, the results."

Civic Education in the Curriculum

In all grades, and especially in K–8, UNO's civics curriculum is built around the calendar—holidays, days of remembrance, and anniversaries of significant events. These include, from the beginning of the school year until the end: Labor Day, September 11th, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day, Holocaust Remembrance Day, Memorial Day, and Flag Day. In grades K–8, each of these dates is tied to a curricular "cycle" meant to guide teachers' instruction for up to five days.

The 10 annual cycles have a common theme that varies grade-to-grade. In kindergarten, the theme is heroes; in first grade, American heroes; second grade, American symbols; third grade, heroes versus role models; fourth grade, decision making; fifth grade, conflict; sixth grade, conflict resolution; seventh grade, personal identity; and eighth grade, civic responsibility. Each cycle includes assessments that are produced by UNO teachers and standardized across the network.

Thus, as the anniversary of 9/11 approaches, for example, second-graders study the terrorist attack with an emphasis on American symbols such as the Twin Towers and the New York City skyline. They listen to "America the Beautiful" and examine the song's references to iconic geography, the pilgrims, liberty, the rule of law, and hope. They also study the Pledge of Allegiance, focusing on the image of Americans as "one nation." As Labor Day approaches, fourth-grade classes consider the decision to create a federal holiday celebrating workers—those who "from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold," in the words of labor leader Peter McGuire, which students learn. Fifth-graders, by contrast, learn about how the theme of conflict ties into Labor Day, including why laborers strike, the biography of labor activist César Chávez, and how workers and owners compromise.[28]

Many of these holidays and significant dates are further opportunities to highlight role models for students. At the network's public commemorations of 9/11 each year, school leaders award "Local Hero" status to "individuals who have selflessly given of themselves for the greater benefit of community, city, or nation," especially as police, firefighters, and soldiers.[29] I attended the 9/11 ceremony at the recently opened UNO Rogers Park

elementary and middle school in 2012, which honored 11 local firefighters and emergency medical technicians. With the student body assembled outside in the carpool lane next to two fire trucks, School Director John Keith praised the heroism of rescue workers on 9/11, and described how police and firefighters from different cities and different backgrounds are bound together as a "family" by their shared commitment to service. As they filed back into school afterward, the students handed thank-you notes and drawings to their visitors.

Then there are Veterans Day and Memorial Day—which elsewhere, laments UNO, are too often "treated only as another day off from school." UNO contends:

> it is incumbent upon schools to impress upon students the significance of these national holidays. Considering that we are currently a nation at war, it is all the more important that students should have an appreciation for those who have been called on to secure America's freedoms from foreign threat, often at great personal sacrifice.[30]

Thus, UNO students study each holiday for "cycles" of several days, and on Veterans Day, students at the Veterans Memorial Campus work with a committee of local veterans to dedicate classrooms in honor of those who have served. Students prepare display boxes with information about each classroom's honoree that become permanent features of the rooms going forward. Explains UNO Academic Affairs Chief Matthew Moeller:

> When I was a teacher at a public school in Washington, DC . . . all I did was go to a workbook on Veterans Day and print out a word-find or something like that. It's easy to do those things. But what is the real meaning? That's why [at UNO] we're so intentional about engaging the fire department, for example, and getting real experiences for students in a way that starts to get them thinking beyond that it's just a day off or it's on the news.[31]

Columbus Day at UNO is "Immigrant Celebration Day," honoring "all immigrants who have come to America seeking refuge and prosperity. Students, teachers, and staff celebrate the diversity within our school campuses and our nation by recognizing all ethnic backgrounds and traditions." Classroom lessons deal largely with the familiar Christopher Columbus story—younger students mostly focus on the basics, and older ones on broader subjects such as exploration, discovery, the Native Americans, and European empire—but the broader context is "the theme of '*E Pluribus Unum*': Out of Many, One. The overarching idea is that regardless of our differences (which we should celebrate), we all share a common citizenship in this country and are united as Americans."[32] UNO explicitly contrasts its approach with the movement to reject Columbus Day for *Día de la Raza* [Day of the Race], which stresses not national unity but, the mistreatment of America's indigenous peoples at the hands of European colonizers.

Holidays and significant dates are further opportunities to highlight role models for students.

Another holiday that sets UNO apart is Flag Day, partly because it is treated as a holiday at all. Many schools accord no significance to June 14, the anniversary of the adoption of the US flag by the Continental Congress in 1777. But on that day each year, UNO hosts a naturalization ceremony for hundreds of immigrants. Students and families participate in the "proud American tradition of welcoming newcomers. Our students bear witness to this momentous occasion for new Americans and—most importantly—help them celebrate this significant moment in their lives."[33]

Rangel says that UNO currently naturalizes nearly 1,000 immigrants per year, with the total over the past two decades reaching more than 80,000, including roughly half of all Mexican immigrants naturalized in Chicago. This effort dates to 1992, when a UNO survey found that more than 140,000 Mexican immigrants in Chicago qualified for US citizenship but had not pursued it.[34] (Today, millions nationwide fit that description. Duke University's Jacob Vigdor notes that Mexican immigrants "become citizens at a lower rate than other immigrant groups," and at a lower rate than in previous generations.[35])

End-of-year field trips are an important part of the civic education curriculum, especially for middle-school students who visit Chicago City Hall in fifth grade, a local university in sixth, the nation's capital in seventh, and New York City in eighth. The series culminates with New York because of the dual themes of 9/11 and immigration.

"Our kindergartners weren't even born on 9/11. Kids being kids, they'll grow up thinking this is ancient history. We wanted to capture that moment where we all felt the patriotism of what that event meant for us personally and as a nation," says Rangel. As for immigration, he explains:

> Sometimes it's easy to say 'We're different, we're not wanted, we're the outsiders, we're foreigners,' and all that. But [visiting] Ellis Island gives you a sense that this is not a new story—this is the experience of many people who've come to this country and they've managed to succeed because they took the thing this country gave them, which is the chance to get ahead, and for the most part, it worked. And hardship that people endure when they first come is part of the American story, and we want to make that connection for our kids and say, 'Now it's your turn, you're part of the history of this country, what's your responsibility to it?' They start to make the connection to their personal stories.

The students' spring 2012 visit to the United Nations headquarters on New York's East River demonstrated how far many still have to go on the path to assimilation and national identity. As Rangel explains, when the students' tour guide asked where they came from, all answered "Chicago." "So you're all Americans?" the guide replied. The kids froze. "I don't know that they knew how to answer that," Rangel says. "That question—it's about, have they taken ownership of this country? Do they feel American? When people stop them in the street, they say 'Well I'm Mexican even though I'm born here.' These are issues that are conflicting. And we have a responsibility to help them resolve that. And that trip helps." He notes that weeks after returning from New York, the students serve as witnesses at the Flag Day naturalization ceremony: "They are going to see people who have chosen to become Americans get sworn in. Those things contribute to helping resolve this identity issue."

During national election years, the UNO calendar includes a lengthy campaign season beginning on September 17—Constitution Day. For six weeks, teachers offer lessons on the founding documents and the political process while students research national, state, and local candidates and campaign for them via classroom debates and bulletin boards. They also mount their own campaigns for positions in student government. When Election Day arrives, school is out of session, but UNO turns every campus into a polling place complete with old voting machines (courtesy of the Board of Elections) and ballots that mimic the real thing—from president to water commissioner—except they include candidates' photographs, says Moeller, the academic affairs chief.

Students are encouraged—but not required—to show up and vote both for student government and national, state, and local offices. "These elections mirror the voluntary nature of American democracy. . . . Students are not mandated to come to school and vote, in keeping with our national election laws. They are given the same opportunity to exercise free will in elections that America affords all citizens," explains UNO's civics curriculum overview.[36] (About half of the campuses double as real polling places for UNO parents and the public.)

Voting is by far the civic skill most emphasized by UNO—and to the exclusion of some other civic skills, especially protesting.

Though students have no grade riding on whether they vote, schools with high turnout are awarded points in the "UNOlympics," the network's year-long competition for bragging rights over accomplishment in academics, culture, community, and athletics. More important, UNO uses student voter turnout as a quantitative metric of "culture and parental engagement" in its teacher-evaluation framework, which affects pay and retention.[37] It's a small metric, accounting for about 1 percent of performance, but "I don't know any other network that has any of that built into their evaluation," says Moeller.

Voting is by far the civic skill most emphasized by UNO—and to the exclusion of some other civic skills, especially protesting. Rangel regrets the Hispanic community's emphasis on nationwide marches for immigration reform over the last decade, including his own participation in Chicago's first major march in 2006. "I think we chose the wrong tactic," he says. "I will never ever take out any of our students to do a protest or an action. That's irresponsible and we don't do that." As he sees it, it's both bad politics and bad pedagogy:

> Look, in some cases, certainly here in Chicago, we have some high schools where we have 54 percent dropout rates within the Hispanic community. And the easy answer for people seeing hundreds and thousands of kids out in the street protesting is that those kids should be in the classroom, not out in the streets—they should be learning. During the marches, some of our teachers asked us, 'Is it ok if we take a busload of kids to the march, because they're asking?' I said no. People need to get back to work. And if we want to empower this community, get them a good education.

Education is step one, as Rangel now sees it, and voting is step two. "The greatest protest action in this

country is your right to vote. And the problem isn't because everybody is undocumented. It's because we have a lot of individuals who are not registered to vote. [They] can but don't vote."

This message comes through loud and clear to UNO students as they approach voting age, says one who graduated from Garcia High School in 2012. In his telling, teachers and school leaders would "always" say: "Go out and vote if you want to make change, protesting isn't the way to do it—it's voting, getting an education, that's how people will listen to you." The student recalls that, as the Occupy Wall Street movement was attracting attention in Chicago and beyond, "We were shown a little bit about what's going on there, and [told] that those people need to go out and vote." He cites a teacher who stressed that any protester's "heart may be in the right place, but they're not making a real change there—they have to go out and actually vote."[38]

Solidifying a Civic Education Infrastructure

Guiding UNO's civic education curriculum is a civics committee that designs and helps teachers implement everything from daily lessons to larger units, field trips, mock elections, and more. Including teachers from all grades, the committee stands apart from regular academic departments. (UNO has one other such committee, which is responsible for overseeing the teaching of reading.) According to teacher Drew Bogan, who sits on the civics committee, its influence is most noticeable at the grade-school level, where students have one teacher who teaches all subjects and may not otherwise offer much civics content (unlike a high-school history or social-studies teacher).[39] But to a significant degree, the committee's record is still to be determined, since it was formed only in 2011. Indeed, whereas UNO's civic education philosophy is clear and firm, many of its methods and tools of implementation remain in flux.

Along with overseeing UNO's calendar-based civic-education offerings, which date back several years, the civics committee has developed new lesson plans that seek to help students understand their various personal and civic identities. Treating identity as a set of concentric circles, the curriculum begins with the individual and then moves outward to family, community, neighborhood, city, state, nation, and world. "At the end of eighth grade," says Moeller, "students will have gone through this arc of identity development in a way that produces a student that is well-rounded, has the work ethic, and also has that civic engagement piece." To date, this curriculum is still in its infancy, with the 2012–13 year being the first in which all teachers had appropriate lesson plans and access to the corresponding knowledge-sharing website.

In Moeller's view, UNO's civics offerings—at least those in the classroom—remain too tied to the calendar, and therefore too spotty. He is satisfied with the standard social-studies curriculum that UNO uses (*Social Studies Alive!* for grades K–8; in high-school, teachers design their own courses), but he does not want it to remain unenhanced on too many days of the year: "Every holiday has a lesson plan set to go with it that was created by our teachers. . . . But what I want to do over this year is, rather than just being holiday-based, to create a stronger connection between the social studies curriculum and what we're actually doing on the civics piece." A key challenge for UNO in the months and years ahead will be finding the right classroom mix of holiday material, identity material, and standard social-studies instruction.

Another challenge is highlighted by Moeller's observation that "some of our great seventh- and eighth-grade teachers are already integrating" the various parts of a cohesive UNO civic education. This fact underscores both the value of excellent teachers and the enduring difficulty of institutionalizing practices across a network. It also brings us to the ubiquitous human capital question.

The question is particularly urgent for UNO given the network's fast growth, from five schools in 2007 to 13 in 2012 and at least 16 in 2013, with more to come. To get its new Rogers Park school open in time for the 2012–13 school year, UNO had to hire an entire faculty—25 teachers and administrators—in about six weeks. Such circumstances can make it difficult enough to hire teachers qualified for a high-expectations charter environment, but UNO insists on also finding every school a director (equivalent to a principal) who shares the organization's civic mission and will prioritize it going forward: "I will tell you for a fact that it is the core of the interview that I do with every school director," says Moeller, adding that the director he hired for Rogers Park, John Keith, "can tell you I probably didn't talk too much [in my interview with him] about instructional capacity as a leader, but rather about what is our organizational belief." Keith confirms the point and says it is also true of the interview he had with Rangel: "We talked for about an hour and a half and I don't think we even talked about me and the job as much as about what community means and what citizenship means."

As for teachers, "it's a growing number who are bought into an idea of transforming a community through this sort of methodology," says Moeller, citing the last two years as especially productive in "honing an identity."

Does that mean UNO's approach to civic education is the main quality that draws teachers? Moeller responds: "Probably not right now. But I think we're working toward that because I think there's something appealing about being part of transforming a community and making it better through education." Replies Keith to the same question: "There's a handful of my teachers that I could definitely say yes, and there's no one I could say no about, but there's a lot of unknown." He hastens to add that because UNO Rogers Park opened so quickly, he did not get to interview his own staff. "Next year I'll be doing the interviewing of my next round of hires and so . . . no one's going to get past me if that core piece isn't part of why they want to be here."

The "core piece" certainly appealed to Civics Committee member Drew Bogan, who has been teaching history at UNO's high school for five years. He was previously in a Latin American studies PhD program. "When you're in academia, it's in vogue to do a lot of questioning America, investigation bordering on accusation, to destroy these myths of American perfection or American goodness," he recalls. He continues:

> Of course, as a history teacher, you know mistakes are made and poor decisions are made. . . . But, as Mr. Rangel says, there's nothing wrong with a little flag-waving. To live in your country, give to your country, add to your country, make it a better place, and make it the best it can get. It's not perfect, and we don't have to hide anything or cover anything up. But be proud of it. You live here for a reason. There are a lot of families who have sacrificed a lot just to be here. We ought to acknowledge that and say why.

The toughest part for UNO teachers, says Moeller, is effectively "challenging" the community they serve. "It's about getting teachers to a place where they're comfortable challenging students and families," he says. "Often, you have this white guilt thing that is one of our biggest struggles. . . . But your role is to push and challenge. As an organization, that's what we're about." In November 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union, long a vociferous critic of charter schools in general and UNO in particular, criticized as "educational apartheid" the fact that UNO "has a student population that is 95 percent Hispanic but only 11.6 percent of its teachers identify as Hispanic or Latino/a."[40] Of his relationships with students, parents, and staff, Moeller says: "I don't see my role any differently because of my background or where I come from. I see myself as fully bought into this mission, and my job is to have the best schools in this city and in this country. It's not going to happen if I can't challenge people."

And if a parent voices skepticism or dissatisfaction regarding some part of the UNO program? "It's all about the relationship and the trust that you build with that student and that family," Moeller says. Here, he cites lessons he learned teaching in DC public schools before moving to UNO:

> The only way that I can overcome [community friction] is by showing my consistent commitment. If that means I'm going to be the soccer coach now, that's what that means. If that means I'm going to make sure I'm at school at 7:00 AM when you show up with your son or daughter, that's what I'm going to do. Continuing to show my commitment so it's not seen as I'm just trying to invade. Because I can't be imposing on people. They have to see that I'm genuinely here to serve their student and their family and their community.

Moeller speaks passionately about this issue of resistance from parents and members of the wider community, but says that at UNO, it has proven mostly theoretical. Rangel frequently makes the same claim: "Our community—the people—I think they're fully in our camp because [our worldview] is what they know. Not because someone has told them, or I've said so, but because that's their experience. . . . We have waiting lists all the time of thousands of families that would love to come to our schools, so I hardly think we're a controversial thing." About UNO's rejection of bilingual education, he says "I get no pushback from my parents. They understand that they want their kids to learn English because they know that it's the way for their kids to succeed. The pushback has not been there in 13 years of running schools."[41]

"If we've received any pushback," Rangel says with a chuckle, "it's from our community leaders"—with those last two words accompanied by sarcastic air quotes.[42] By this, he means much of the Hispanic political and cultural establishment, including high-profile groups such as the National Council of La Raza [The Race] and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, or MALDEF. Such groups oppose UNO, Rangel argues, because they are dedicated to stressing the difficulties for Hispanics in America, plus the need for multiculturalism, bilingual education, and other measures that UNO considers ill-suited to the real needs of the community. "To me, that's the easy route," he says. "I can be on TV all the time if I do that. But that's not the point of leadership."

In this context, Rangel tells the story of UNO's Veterans Memorial Campus and the Archer Heights Civic

Association. In 2007, when UNO was renovating and preparing to move into the former bread factory on the corner of West 47th Street and South Kildare Avenue, the local civic association began organizing against the effort. It cited safety concerns, as students would be going to school in an area zoned for industry. But underlying its arguments, says Rangel, were other concerns—namely that its traditionally Polish American neighborhood would be increasingly populated and dominated by Hispanics, with whom the older residents had not always had smooth relations.

The "easy way" to get the civic association to drop its objections, Rangel says, would have been to mount a pressure campaign: organize a rally in front of the building where the association meets, have signs and chants decrying a hidebound and prejudiced old guard, and invite journalists to ask association members uncomfortable questions on camera. Instead, Rangel attended a meeting of the association with five UNO high-school students in uniform who spoke to the group about why their schooling is important to them. Rangel spoke too, explaining that UNO tolerates none of the graffiti, gang violence, or public drinking that the group may have justifiably feared. Soon after, the association gave its thumbs up to UNO's expansion plans in Archer Heights.

"The usual scenario" with organizations like UNO, says Boston College's Skerry, "is to shove things in people's faces, to make demands, say it's ours now, your time's over, we're asserting our rights—to push people away as an assertion of your identity and rights." What UNO models for its students and community, by contrast, is "this notion of reciprocity—we're new and we're here and we want to work something out with you. I'm not going to scream about rights, but we'll work together and you'll have a piece of this." So it was with the Archer Heights Civic Association, of which UNO is now a dues-paying member, says Rangel, and which now holds its regular meetings free of charge on the Veterans Memorial Campus. Soon after their rapprochement, UNO invited the association to name one of the campus's schools after a war hero of its choosing, assuming it would honor a Polish American. Instead, it chose to name the school after Omar Torres, a Hispanic son of Archer Heights.

The Future of Hispanic Citizenship

On June 16, 2012, UNO held its first ever high-school graduation at the Harris Theater on the north end of Chicago's iconic Millennium Park. The venue was chosen deliberately to get families downtown, Rangel says, because for some, the trip would be just their second time in that part of their sprawling city. After reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and singing the "Star-Spangled Banner," the assembled students and parents heard precise details about the academic achievements of the class valedictorian (grade-point average of 4.3, en route to Northwestern University, Mexican-born parents didn't finish elementary school), salutatorian (second-highest grade-point average), honors students (wearing gold cords), National Honors Society inductees (wearing blue sashes), and teachers (wearing gowns and hoods signifying their highest academic degrees). Two students won $1,000 each toward college tuition from the Peter J. Giannopoulos Scholarship Fund for writing essays on the importance of community service and civic sacrifice; the fund honors a native of Skokie, Illinois, who was killed in Iraq, where he served beside William Martinez, who is now an information-technology staffer at UNO. Rangel's remarks to the graduates stressed that individual choice and effort had gotten them this far and would determine whether they succeed in college and beyond. All speakers' remarks were in English, except when the high school's director, Josephine Gomez, addressed the parents, many of whom speak only Spanish.

> By rejecting the view that its Hispanic students are simply part of an American mass called "minorities," UNO finds itself an odd group out in the world of education.

Of the 105 graduates that day, 103 were already enrolled in two- or four-year colleges, and two had committed to joining the military. Their average ACT score was 19.1 (out of 36.0), compared to the Chicago city average of 17.6.[43] UNO says they had earned millions in higher-education scholarships from the Gates Foundation, the Golden Apple Foundation, and others. The graduates' standing as citizens, however, was another matter: civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions are all difficult to measure qualitatively or quantitatively, and to date, UNO has not devised clear metrics for doing so.

UNO tells its students that upon graduation, they are expected to be able to compete in the local, national, and global marketplaces; to be civically engaged; to be

intellectually curious; and to be people of integrity. But these characteristics are easier named than assessed. Regarding citizenship in particular, UNO students do not have to demonstrate proficiency on any assessment—such as the civics portion of the National Assessment for Educational Progress, for example, or the US Citizenship Exam—before they can earn a diploma. Of course, all graduates must perform in an environment rich with UNO's brand of civic content inside and outside the classroom, and UNO does track student voter turnout at mock elections, which Moeller says was 70 percent overall in November 2012.

Yet the network has difficulty measuring the "state of mind," as he puts it, behind healthy citizenship. For example, how should graduates think of their identities, and how do they? "American," "Mexican American," "Mexican"? Says Rangel: "I'd like to be at a point where people just see themselves as 'Americans of Mexican descent,' but that doesn't just roll off the tongue so easily." In any case, UNO does not know where its graduates fall on this question because it does not ask—though Moeller says it may start doing so in the future.

Devising metrics of healthy citizenship, both for students and for alumni after they graduate, is one of the three near-term goals that UNO leaders have set for themselves regarding civic education. Another is creating more cohesion among the curricula that deal with civic holidays, student identity, and traditional social studies. The third, says Moeller, is improving teacher training so that all teachers—in all grades and subjects—are equipped to "capitalize on every opportunity they have" for civic education, from national news to days when flags are unexpectedly flown at half-staff in honor of a fallen firefighter.

The training and especially recruitment of teachers is a particular challenge—and one compounded by UNO's worldview and reputation. Given its surging human-capital needs, the disparate quality of teacher-training programs, and the low bar for teacher certification, UNO is considering starting a teacher-training and certification pipeline of its own. An obstacle, however, is that universities seem disinclined to enter into cooperative arrangements with the network. Though UNO recruits at Chicago-area universities (and has strong ties to Teach For America), it has had bad luck seeking broader partnerships with people and programs in higher education. "I haven't found a university that identifies with what we do," says Rangel. He continues:

> Our idea of civic engagement is nuanced. A lot of what I've seen when [others] talk about getting youth involved civically is really about activism, civic action. Nothing wrong with that, but that's not what we're trying to do. . . . [Ours] is a much more nuanced attempt at civic engagement and citizenship, and these concepts that somehow have proven elusive because they're harder to understand.

Moeller attributes the problem to disagreements over "the idea of urban education," explaining with exasperation: "You have all these degrees in urban education. But what does 'urban' mean? . . . Poor black kids, or poor Latino kids, or both?" The prevailing view in the multiculturalist halls of higher education, Moeller argues, actually "generalizes and takes away the individuality of the students and families and communities with whom we work. But if you don't take that Middle Eastern student or that Latino student or that black student for who they are—the assets that their family brings with them, and their familial history—then what are we doing?" Thus, by rejecting the view that its Hispanic students are simply part of an American mass called "minorities," UNO finds itself an odd group out in the world of education.

That position does not really faze the activists atop this charter network. "We're in the school business to transform communities," says Rangel. The educational goals include success through high school and college. More broadly, in Rangel's view, the central question for Hispanic leaders, parents, teachers, and students to answer is: "Do we want to be the next victimized minority group in America, or do we want to be the next successful immigrant group?"

Author Biography

David Feith is an assistant editorial features editor at the *Wall Street Journal* and chairman of CitizenshipFirst, which he cofounded after publishing *Teaching America: The Case for Civic Education* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

Notes

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