

Latino and Latina seminary students find place to connect

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WACO—Latino and Latina students at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary began the spring semester with a reunion at Primera Iglesia Bautista in Waco, celebrating the creation of an association where they "fit."

Students formed the Latino/Latina Student Association in the fall semester with the support of seminary faculty and staff.



Bobby Martinez

Bobby Martinez, vice president of the association, first started exploring his Latino roots when he began his studies at Truett Seminary.

"For numerous reasons, I was never immersed in the cultural aspect of what it meant to be a Latino, so I felt like I was missing a part of me for such a long time," Martinez said. "When I came to Truett, I joined a reading group and began to learn more about the history of Latin America."

As he read, Martinez also learned about colonization and distinctively Latino/Latina approaches to theology.

As a second-generation Latino and the son of an immigrant mother, Martinez realized how it is difficult for him to fit in American social groups—as well as some churches.

“I started thinking about my place in the church. I don’t fit in Hispanic communities because I don’t speak Spanish, but I do relate to them to some degree,” Martinez said. “But I also don’t completely fit in white churches because I am not white.”

As he talked to other Latinos and Latinas, he realized they also faced issues related to their ethnicity, although their experiences varied, he said.

Nataly Mora, the president of the association, grew up interacting very little with Anglos but relating well to other Latinos and Latinas.

She and other students formed the association both for those who already felt an affinity to their culture and those—like Martinez—who still were looking for a place where they “fit.”



Latino and Latina students from Truett Theological Seminary visit over dinner at Primera Iglesia

Bautista in Waco. (Photo / Isa Torres)

“There is this disparity between both ends of the Latino and Latina experience, so we decided to organize this association,” Martinez said.

Truett Dean Todd Still, Jared Alcántara, professor of preaching, and Bill Walker, assistant director of spiritual formation at the seminary, supported the students’ efforts to form the association.

“These students are a joy to work with, and they have taken a lot of initiative in leadership,” Alcántara said. “I see my role as connecting students to each other, to the Truett community and to a wider network of churches.”

The association’s founders made a conscious effort not only to include students from Spanish-speaking Latin American backgrounds, but also students from Portuguese-speaking Latin American countries like Brazil.

“We purposefully called it Latino and Latina, because that was the most inclusive name that could help people relate,” Martinez said.

First-generation and second-generation Latinos and Latinas, students who are bilingual, those who speak English only, and students who have come from various Latin American countries “are all able to fellowship because they understand the cultural aspects,” Martinez said.

In addition to helping each other understand differing aspects of being a Latino or Latina, Martinez said, the association plans to serve others and also help others see the different identities that make up Latinos and Latinas.

“As Latinos and Latinas, we must continue to make space to see ourselves,” Martinez said. “As Baptists, it is important to see and affirm Baptists of

other backgrounds, which includes those of Latino and Latina experience.”