

Report for the Pedagogical Inquiry Grant: History and Politics of Mexican Food

Team members:

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Project Description

For the past couple of years we have been discussing a way to combine our Mexico focused classes in both the Politics and History departments to reach a broader range of students by working together. After several generative preliminary conversations, we came to the conclusion that the history and politics of Mexican food would provide an extremely compelling entry point into the kinds of questions we'd like students to explore in our class. "Mexican food" is a contested, global category cross-cut with Indigenous, Spanish, African, Middle Eastern, French, German, and other influences, deeply intertwined with histories of nationalism, transnationalism, revolution, internal and external migrations, rural-urban transitions, international politics, and industrialization, and central to the way that "Mexican" is conceived of both in Mexico and abroad.

With this grant we discussed and designed a cross-listed course that would not only attempt to address most of these themes but that would also connect our Mexico-focused teaching to the local community. We put together a broad reading list of both canonical texts and research scholarship in juxtaposition with field trips and conversations as well as "cooking" seminars with local community partners.

What we did

We met several times during the fall of 2022 and then resumed our meetings in the early summer of 2023—Camilo was on sabbatical during the spring semester. During these meetings we set out to do the following:

- put together a comprehensive reading list of recent and older canonical texts of both food and Mexican history, including recent scholarship from Mexico;
- design a class schedule that covers the history of Mexico, from pre-conquest to the 21st century, along with a geographic overview of the country and its diaspora, as well as an in depth coverage of themes including indigeneity, Blackness, gender, class, economic policies and migration;
- plan a field trip to Yakima and an excursion to local Mexican grocery stores;
- organize conversations and oral history roundtables with community partners.

Outcomes

We designed and proposed a cross-listed course: HIST/POL 120: History and Politics of Mexican Food. It is now offered for the fall of 2023, and at the time of writing, the class enrollment is at full capacity.

Some of the learning objectives we hope to achieve with this course are:

- Identify and connect themes of food, identity, and the construction of nationalism.
- Discuss and debate questions of tradition and authenticity.
- Locate important geographical sites and trace the trajectory of movement of both people and commodities through food.
- Unpack political context and historical contingencies of food production and consumption.
- Engage in meaningful conversations and share oral histories with community members and develop a relationship and understanding of the Mexican and Mexican American community in Walla Walla.

We intend to make this a recurring class—taught every two or three years—so we will be very mindful of what works and the limitations we encounter during the fall semester, as well as take into account the feedback from the students and particularly from the community partners. An important goal of this course, in addition to the learning objectives for the students, is to build and sustain a meaningful relationship with community partners and the Walla Walla Mexican and Mexican American community more broadly, based on respect, understanding, reciprocity, and commensality.