



A major new research initiative known as El Centro—  
federally funded and based at the School of Nursing and Health Studies—  
seeks novel solutions to behavioral health issues  
and care disparities among Americans of Hispanic descent.

## THE “MELTING POT” —THAT ECLECTIC MIX OF ETHNICITIES AND CULTURES THAT EPITOMIZES THE UNITED STATES—IS TAKING ON A DISTINCTLY LATIN FLAVOR.

Hailing from throughout South and Central America as well as the Caribbean, Hispanic-Americans are changing the face of the nation. Today, more than 40 million Americans are of Hispanic descent—the largest minority population in the United States—and their numbers are expected to triple by 2050. • While their numerous contributions to popular culture are splashed across the media, the reality of life for millions of Americans of Latino descent is much less well known. Hispanic-Americans suffer disproportionately from HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, and domestic violence, as well as associated mental health disorders such as depression. Researchers are just starting to examine the complex factors that account for these disparities and to seek effective, culturally tailored interventions. • This September, the School of Nursing and Health Studies received a \$7 million, five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health’s National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities to establish a center of excellence known as El Centro: The Center for Hispanic Health Disparities Research. One of five new comprehensive NIH-funded centers for health disparities research nationwide (up to 16 grants to both new and existing centers will be made over the next several months), it is to date the only such initiative to be based at a nursing school and the only one in Florida. • “Few studies have considered how factors such as culture or ethnicity impact the incidence, prevalence, and burden of specific health conditions among Hispanic-Americans,” says Dean Nilda P. Peragallo, Dr.P.H., R.N., F.A.A.N., who has conducted extensive research focusing on Hispanic health disparities and serves as the program’s director and lead investigator. “El Centro will promote investigations targeted toward issues that disproportionately affect Hispanics as a way to help improve the health and lifespan of this significant portion of our population.”

# HISPANIC HEALTH FRONT & CENTER

BY BARBAR PIERCE



Peragallo



Santisteban

## MULTI-YEAR STUDIES

### HIV Intervention Reducing Health Disparities Among Hispanic Women

Nilda Peragallo, Dr. P.H., R.N., F.A.A.N., Principal Investigator; Rosina Cianelli, Ph.D., Project Director; Jose G. Castro, M.D., Co-Investigator

HIV/AIDS is the fourth leading cause of death among Hispanic women between the ages of 25-34. This three-year study will evaluate the effectiveness of an HIV risk-reduction intervention led by and tailored to Hispanic women while gaining insights into the roles of acculturation and family functioning.

*“Learning more about why Hispanic women engage in risky behaviors will assist health professionals to provide effective, culturally competent care, while advancing the development of individual and population-based interventions targeted toward this group.”*

Nilda Peragallo, Dr. P.H., R.N., F.A.A.N.

### Preventing Health Disparities in Hispanic Youth

Daniel Santisteban, Ph.D., Principal Investigator; Lourdes Suarez-Morales, Co-Investigator

Hispanics represent nearly one in five of all U.S. AIDS cases, and Hispanic adolescents are using controlled substances at alarming rates. This three-year randomized clinical trial will study a family therapy intervention that aims to reduce/prevent substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors among Hispanic adolescents while addressing co-occurring mental disorders.

*“My work is designed to learn more about the unique values and life experiences of Hispanic adolescents and families—and to develop a drug abuse treatment model that effectively addresses the stresses and utilizes the strengths of the Hispanic family.”*

Daniel Santisteban, Ph.D.

## STRUCTURAL SYNERGY

El Centro is composed of three cores that provide a synergistic infrastructure for research, education, and dissemination of data.

- **The administration core** oversees both day-to-day management and overall direction, and serves as a liaison among the University, the NIH, and the community.
- **The research core** provides leadership in building an environment that promotes scientific innovation, rigor, and collaboration, as well as dissemination of resulting data.
- **The research education and training core** is designed to impart the knowledge and skills necessary for culturally competent health disparities research among students, emerging investigators, and health providers.

All of El Centro’s research, training, outreach, and recruitment activities are guided with input from two advisory boards: one reflecting scientific expertise, the other providing community perspectives.



Vazquez

Mitrani

## PILOT STUDIES

### Project VIDA: Violence, Intimate Relationships, and Drugs Among Latinos

Elias Vazquez, Ph.D., N.P., F.A.A.N., F.A.A.N.P., Principal Investigator; Joseph De Santis, Ph.D., A.R.N.P., and Rosa M. Gonzalez, R.N., M.S.N., M.P.H., Co-Investigators

Data from this 12-month study will inform the adaptation of a program known as SEPA (Salud-Health, Educación-Education, Promoción-Promotion, Autocuidado-Self-Care), developed by Dean Nilda Peragallo for Hispanic women, for Hispanic men.

### Modifying Structural Ecosystems Therapy for HIV+ Hispanic Women in Prenatal Care

Victoria Mitrani, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Mitrani studies an approach known as SET (Structural Ecosystems Therapy) to improve outcomes among HIV-positive minority women who are recovering from drug abuse. This 18-month study will adapt SET for Hispanic HIV-positive women in prenatal care.

### Combined Expertise

Based at the M. Christine Schwartz Center for Nursing and Health Studies, El Centro marshals the combined expertise of researchers within the School of Nursing and Health Studies and the Center for Family Studies. “These researchers have a 16-year history of collaboration in training, mentorship, and research,” says Peragallo. “Both entities have a track record of dedication to research on Hispanic health, while each brings a distinctive perspective and area of expertise.”

The initiative will also draw on the expertise of the Departments of Medicine and OB/GYN, the dean of the School of Education, and the chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, as well as faculty members from Florida International University’s School of Public Health. In the months to come, the El Centro leadership plans to align its activities with those of other initiatives with

similar or complementary goals. Among these are the six-year Hispanic Community Health Study, for which the University of Miami is one of four NIH-funded sites.

This intensive level of coordination is crucial for behavioral research, according to Victoria Behar Mitrani, Ph.D., who will direct El Centro’s research core. “Scientific strides are made by research that builds on other research,” says Mitrani, who conducts collaborative studies of family-oriented interventions at the Center for Family Studies. “In bench research, that cycle of inquiry and insight can often proceed at a fairly steady pace. By contrast, studies that seek to develop behavioral interventions can take years.

“Historically, it’s also been difficult to gather the number of participants needed to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of new approaches,” Mitrani adds. “The El Centro partner-

ships will provide a multidisciplinary synergy that would seldom be possible among investigators working independently—and the critical mass needed to propel such studies to fruition.”

### National Perspective

In addition to sponsoring two full studies and two pilot studies in its first year of operation, El Centro will launch an ongoing program to selectively fund proposals for health disparities research originating throughout the University community. While Hispanics in south Florida, with its robust, economically vigorous Latin population and multicultural environment, do not face the same issues as those in other areas of the U.S., Mitrani says the systematic evaluation of new interventions with local Hispanic populations will yield insights that can be disseminated on a national level.

Rosina Cianelli, Ph.D., who directs El Centro’s administrative core, also serves as a co-investigator with Dean Peragallo on one of the initiative’s multi-year studies: a three-year investigation of the effectiveness of a Hispanic-oriented health education program called SEPA as a tool to reduce HIV risk among Hispanic women. To be effective, says Cianelli, such interventions must address issues such as drug use and sexual activity in a way to which Hispanic women will be receptive—a special challenge in a culture that does not value candor about such sensitive topics.

By combining cultural sensitivity with scientific rigor and a large study population, Cianelli says, “We hope to identify and foster HIV/AIDS prevention behaviors that will benefit both individual women and their communities.” The study’s methodical design and ambitious goals exemplify El Centro’s approach and aspirations, she

adds: “Over the next several years, we envision the initiative as a leader in improving the health of Hispanic community and expanding scientific knowledge.”

### Learning by Doing

As director of El Centro’s research education core, Denise Korniewicz, Ph.D., F.A.A.N., will oversee efforts to guide the efforts of new investigators. “We plan to put students ranging from freshmen to post-doctoral candidates to work on El Centro studies so they’ll see firsthand the role that culturally sensitive, carefully designed investigations can play in creating effective interventions for this population,” Korniewicz says. “To help aspiring investigators build the skills to conduct meaningful research, we’ll provide coursework on addressing health disparities and designing and running studies, as well as special seminars, fellowship programs, and research

forums.” Center faculty will mentor investigators seeking to write full-fledged grant proposals after completing pilot studies.

“All of these activities will provide abundant opportunities for students to learn from each other as well as from faculty,” Korniewicz says. “A whole constellation of ideas will be inspired by their experiences and insights, so it will be a continually evolving process.”

The data gleaned from these activities could benefit millions of Hispanic-Americans who currently struggle for survival, dignity, and hope in the shadow of the American dream. Ultimately, says Peragallo, such efforts make the nation a better place for all of us—whatever our ethnic heritage or the particular place we call home. “As our population continues to diversify,” she says, “the vision of equality that is so central to our concept of America deserves to be realized in every aspect of each citizen’s life.”