



3RD ANNUAL HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH SYMPOSIUM

“UNIDOS, SOMOS MÁS.” “TOGETHER, WE ARE MORE.”

Thursday, October 1, 2026

9:00 A.M. – 3:00 P.M.

Governors State University

Guided by the theme “UNIDOS,SOMOS MÁS. — TOGETHER, WE ARE MORE,” GovState’s 3rd Annual HispanicHeritage Month Symposium brings our campus community together with the greater community to celebrate Hispanic and Latinx cultures, honor their contributions, and foster connection.



An Illinois Public University

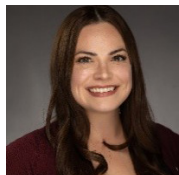
8:30 A.M. | Doors Open

Engbretson Hall

Arrive early, grab a beverage, connect with fellow participants, and prepare for a vibrant day of learning, culture, and community.

9:00 – 10:20 AM | Opening Program and Keynote

Engbretson Hall



Welcome

Kimberly C. Gonzalez, *Associate Director of Alumni Relations*

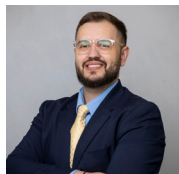
Join us as we officially open the 3rd Annual Hispanic Heritage Month Symposium and set the stage for a day centered on **“UNIDOS, SOMOS MÁS. — TOGETHER, WE ARE MORE.”**



Land Acknowledgement Statement

Karina Hernandez Cazarez

Assistant Director and Greer Scholars Mentor, Latinx Resource Center



Community Impact Award Recognition

Master of Ceremony, Emmanuel Lopez,
Director, Latinx Resource Center



Keynote Address

Solidarity Across Racial Communities in the Americas & the Chi'

Keynote Presenter: Dr. Gabriel Cortez

Dr. Cortez will lead an informative, inclusive, and interactive keynote experience designed to engage participants in learning, dialogue, and reflection around the symposium theme.

Alumni Impact Award Recognition

10:30 – 11:15 AM | Concurrent Dialogue Sessions

Choose the conversation that interests you most. These interactive sessions bring participants together with students, faculty, professionals, and alumni community experts to explore practical issues through learning, discussion, and shared experience. Click [HERE](#) for Room Numbers

Dr. Rey Andújar, Associate Professor of Spanish, will present **“Translation and Adaptation,”** an interactive exploration of how bilingualism and cultural heritage can transform narratives, oral histories, and archival materials into film and theater.

Dr. Somi Nagaraj, nursing leader, educator, and scholar, will present **“Foods That Reverse Diabetes,”** exploring the connection between food, culture, and healthier choices for preventing and managing diabetes.

Rene Rivas, CRPC™, Financial Advisor with Merrill Lynch Wealth Management, will present **“From Cultural Wealth to Financial Wealth,”** exploring practical ways to leverage knowledge, relationships, entrepreneurship, and financial decision-making to build long-term and generational wealth.

Dr. Amy Vujaklija, Senior Director of Educator Preparation, Accreditation, and Assessment, will lead **“Day@GovState,”** an interactive experience introducing prospective students to GovState, college life, educational pathways, and opportunities to become part of the Jaguar community.

11:30 AM – 12:30 PM | UNIDOS, SOMOS MÁS: The Student Experience

Engbretson Hall

What does *Together, We Are More* look like through the eyes of our students?

Hear directly from a diverse panel of GovState students and alumni representing different academic levels, backgrounds, experiences, and journeys. Through candid conversation, panelists will share perspectives on culture, identity, belonging, education, challenges, aspirations, and the people and communities that have helped shape their GovState experience.

This is an opportunity to listen to student voices rather than simply talk about students and to consider what all of us can do to strengthen belonging and connection across our university community.

12:30 PM – 1:45 PM | Lunch & Join the Conversation

Choose a conversation. Pull up a chair. Meet someone new. Choose a table based on a topic that interests you and join a facilitated conversation with other symposium participants. Each table will explore a different theme inspired by the day's discussions, creating space for reflection, shared experiences, new perspectives, and meaningful connection.



Special Performance
by Silverio Aguayo

Student Impact Award Recognition

2:00 – 2:45 PM | Concurrent Dialogue Session II

Continue the conversation with another interactive learning experience. Afternoon sessions offer opportunities to explore well-being, language, belonging, culture, and the arts from different perspectives.

Dr. Kim Major-Ford Director of the Counseling and Wellness Center will present “**Strengthening Our Mental Health Through Culture and Community**,” an interactive exploration of how culture, connection, and community can strengthen resilience, reduce stress, and support emotional well-being.

Dr. Novia Pagone, Professor of Hispanic Studies, will present “**Pan Comido: Proverbs and Idioms en Español**,” a fun, interactive exploration of popular Spanish expressions and the cultural and historical stories behind the words we use.

Marquita Gill, M.A., higher education professional and founder of GovState’s Doctoral Community Network, will present “**Finding Your People: Creating Belonging in Graduate School**,” exploring how students can build meaningful connections, supportive communities, and spaces where they can thrive.

GovState’s Art Gallery and Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park will offer an **Art & Mural Experience featuring Yvonne Domenge**, inviting participants to explore the renowned Mexican sculptor’s work and experience Hispanic heritage through art, movement, culture, and connection.

2:45 – 3:00 P.M. | A Call to Collective Action

Engbretson Hall

Employee Impact Award Recognition

We end where our theme began: **Together.**

After a day of listening, learning, sharing, and connecting, participants will be invited to reflect on one question: **What will you carry forward?**

This brief closing experience challenges each of us to turn what we learned into action—on campus, in our workplaces, in our families, and throughout our communities. Because UNIDOS, SOMOS MÁS is more than the theme of a symposium; **it is a reminder that what we build together can be greater than what any of us can build alone.**



Facilitated by:
Valerie Butron
Educator, author, speaker, curriculum leader
and co-founder of Tumbao Bilingual Books

Meet Our Presenters



Dr. Rey Andújar is an Associate Professor of Spanish at GovState, award-winning author, playwright, and cultural consultant. His teaching and scholarship explore Latin American and Caribbean studies, language, literature, identity, and culture. A Dominican-born writer, his creative work spans novels, short fiction, film, and theater.



Valerie Butrón is an educator, author, and GovState adjunct faculty member with experience as a teacher and administrator. Co-owner of Tumbao Bilingual Books, she creates inclusive bilingual children's literature and provides professional development focused on education, restorative practices, culture, and community building.



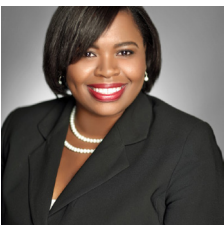
Karina Hernandez Cazarez, is Assistant Director of GovState's Latinx Resource Center and Chair of the SOMOS Latinx Employee Resource Group. A GovState alumna and longtime student advocate, she works to strengthen student success, leadership, belonging, and access while empowering students to reach their full potential



Dr. Gabriel A. Cortez is a Professor and Director of the **ENLACE Leadership Institute at Northeastern Illinois University**, where his work centers on educational leadership, community engagement, and advancing opportunities for Latino communities. His scholarship and teaching explore grassroots activism in education, intercultural relations, cultural identity, globalization, and Chicago history. Dr. Cortez earned his Ph.D. and M.Ed. in Educational Policy Studies and his bachelor's degree in History and U.S./Latin American Studies from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. A passionate educator and community advocate, he brings an engaging, culturally grounded approach to leadership, learning, and collective action.



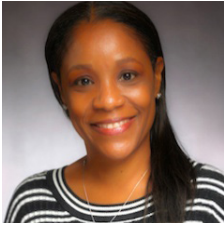
Kim C. Gonzalez is Associate Director of Alumni Relations at GovState and a GovState alumna. A strategic alumni engagement, communications, and advancement professional, she builds meaningful connections among alumni, students, and the university while creating opportunities for engagement, partnership, and continued involvement in the GovState community.



Marquita Gill, M.A. is an educator and higher education professional with more than 15 years of experience. Her work centers on student success, leadership, career development, and belonging. She is also founder and president of GovState's Doctoral Community Network, created to strengthen connection, peer support, and professional growth among doctoral students.



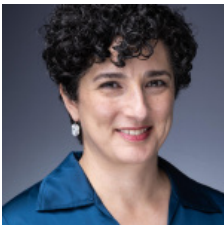
Emmanuel López, M.A. is Director of GovState's Latinx Resource Center and Undocumented Student Liaison. A bilingual higher education leader and student advocate, he advances college access, belonging, leadership, and student success, with particular commitment to Latinx, undocumented, and historically underrepresented students and their families



Dr. Kim Major-Ford is a licensed clinical psychologist, educator, and mental health advocate committed to strengthening individual and community well-being. Her work emphasizes culturally responsive care, resilience, and the power of connection, helping individuals and communities recognize their strengths and develop practical strategies to support mental and emotional wellness.



Dr. Somi Nagaraj is a nursing leader, educator, and scholar with more than 30 years of experience in healthcare and academia. A GovState MSN and DNP graduate, she advances nursing education, community health, mentorship, and collaboration, with a commitment to prevention, wellness, and improved health outcomes.



Dr. Novia Pagone is a Professor of Hispanic Studies at GovState whose teaching and research explore culture, identity, media, and public discourse. An advocate for active learning, she creates engaging, supportive environments where students build Spanish-language skills through conversation, real-world activities, and meaningful cultural connections.



Dr. Joi Patterson is Chief of Institutional Engagement and Excellence at Governors State University, where she advances initiatives that strengthen belonging, pluralism, and student success. With more than 30 years of experience as an educator and executive leader, she has served in roles including vice president, superintendent, principal, and professor. Her work focuses on building strategic partnerships, expanding access, and implementing innovative programs that promote equity and institutional impact. A scholar, grant leader, and co-host of the Teaching and Learning: Theory vs. Practice podcast, Dr. Patterson is committed to transforming education through collaboration, engagement, and purposeful leadership.



Rene Rivas, CRPC™ is a GovState alumnus and Financial Advisor with Merrill Lynch Wealth Management. He helps professionals, business owners, and families build, protect, and transfer wealth. Passionate about financial literacy and community engagement, he mentors students and serves on the GovState Alumni Association Board.



Dr. Amy Vujaklija is Senior Director of Educator Preparation, Accreditation, and Assessment at GovState and a former middle and high school teacher. Her work focuses on teacher preparation, recruitment and retention, school-community partnerships, and educator development, with research exploring teacher leadership and student learning.



Explore the work of renowned Mexican sculptor **Yvonne Domenge**, whose vibrant, large-scale sculptures celebrate movement, nature, geometry, and connection. The experience highlights Domenge's Windwaves, part of GovState's Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park, and invites participants to experience Hispanic heritage through the power of visual art.

Hispanic Heritage Month Impact Awards

The Hispanic Heritage Month Impact Awards celebrate individuals whose leadership, service, advocacy, and commitment strengthen and uplift the Hispanic community. Honoring a student, employee, community member, and alum, the awards recognize those who create opportunities, foster connections, and make a meaningful impact on campus and throughout the greater community.

Student Impact Award: Emily Estrada

President of ALAS, active member of the Honors College and the Greer Scholars Program.

Employee Impact Award: Juan Gonzalez

The Dual Degree Program was recently nationally recognized for “Programs to Watch” for the Seal of Excelencia. He has also volunteered for both conferences that I led: Sharing the Dream and ILACHE.

Community Impact Award: Lisa Sanchez

Helped establish the Greer Scholars Program at GovState. This fall, we brought in our biggest cohort of students, with 26 Greer Scholars.

Alumni Impact Award: Rene C Rivas

A dedicated alumnus who gives back through mentorship, financial education, volunteer service, and leadership. He uses his professional expertise to support students, strengthen the alumni community, and contribute to economic growth in the Southland.



Meet the Planning Team

The 3rd Annual Hispanic Heritage Month Symposium is supported by the Office of Institutional Engagement and Excellence, led by Dr. Joi Patterson, Chief of Institutional Engagement and Excellence, in collaboration with a dedicated planning team representing departments and partners across GovState and the greater community. Together, the team brings diverse perspectives, experiences, and expertise to create a vibrant day of culture, learning, dialogue, and connection reflective of this year's theme, "UNIDOS, SOMOS MÁS. — TOGETHER, WE ARE MORE."



Office of Institutional Engagement and Excellence
Dr. Joi Patterson
Chief of Institutional Engagement and Excellence



Latinx Resource Center
Emmanuel Lopez
Director of Latinx Resource Center



Latinx Resource Center
Karina Hernandez Cazarez
Assistant Director of Latinx Resource Center and Greer Mentor



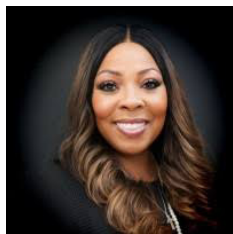
Alumni Relations
C. Kimberly Gonzalez
Associate Director of Alumni Relations



College of Education and Human Development
Dr. Amy Vujaklija
Senior Director of Educator Preparation, Accreditation, and Assessment



Community Partner and Faculty
Valerie Butron
Educator, author, speaker, curriculum leader and co-founder of Tumbao Bilingual Books



Center of Student Engagement and Leadership
Victoria Lloyd
Coordinator for Civic Engagement and Intercultural Education



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