The Social Justice Internship Program
The Social Justice Internship Grant Program places 13 students in a Chicago-area nonprofit to engage in important work. This is a year-long internship experience in which students complete 250-275 hours while also learning about leadership, and community development and organizing in a classroom setting. Through this program, I had the opportunity to intern for the Office of Latino Affairs at Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Catholic Charities
Catholic Charities is one of the largest private, nonprofit social service agencies in the Midwest. Their mission is to fulfill the Church’s role in the mission of charity to anyone, regardless of religious, ethnic or economic background. They do this by providing a comprehensive network of services including food pantries, mental health counseling, affordable housing, senior services, and refugee resettlement to name a few.

Office of Latino Affairs
The Office focuses on three tasks: Promote Catholic Charities services to Latinxs through community outreach and education; Identify unmet needs in the Latinx community and work collaboratively toward creative solutions; Act as a resource to parishes and community partners, streamlining the referral process for Latinxs in need of services.

Learning Objectives
- I will develop an understanding of how I can be a social change agent.
- I will learn how to communicate with stakeholders.
- I will develop better self-care practices.

Event Planning and Management
During the fall semester, I helped the Office of Latino Affairs prepare for an annual fundraiser called, Ayudando Nuestras Familias (“Ayudando”). I kept track of donations and sponsorships as we received them.

Through this experience, I improved my organization skills. Even though this project did not involve direct service or work with communities, I gained an appreciation for work that is done behind the scenes. Fundraisers and other kinds of work are crucial for organizations to continuing functioning.

Community Needs Assessment
I helped create a proposal for a community needs assessment for the Latinx community in a county in Illinois. The most important lesson I got from working on this project is that you need to get out of the office to be a true change agent. Though a lot of important work can happen in an office setting, it is important to also work in the community. After I met with a local leader, I began to understand that only community members understand what is best for their community. As outsiders, it’s our job to listen.

Presenting at a Leadership Summit
I presented alongside my supervisor at a leadership summit for Latina mothers (Cumbre de Liderazgo de la Mujer) in an Illinois school district. As the daughter of immigrants, I talked about my personal experiences to give the perspective of a child of immigrants and provided suggestions on how mothers could communicate with their children.

This was a very meaningful experience for me because it taught me that my voice matters and that people, in an appropriate, are willing to listen to me and may want to hear what I have to say. At first, I was nervous about presenting because I was unsure if what I had to say made sense or was relevant. At the end of the summit, however, one mother approached me to tell me that she wanted to hear more about my experiences because she wanted to make amends with her own daughter. That’s when I began to understand that I can have an impact on others and that my story can resonate with others.

Concluding Thoughts
I am grateful for this internship experience that has not only taught me about community-based work but also empowered me to become a leader. As a Latina, it was especially meaningful because I was able to apply my own knowledge and experiences to advocate for the community I am a part of. Also, it felt like I was given the opportunity to demonstrate the significance of the Latinx community and show why their lives and voices matter. Unfortunately, my internship is coming to an end, but I plan to continue being a leader in the community no matter what career path I take.

Special Thanks to Andrew Miller (CEL, LUC) and Dr. Cary Rositas-Sheftel (Latino and University Initiatives Manager at Catholic Charities)
Want to know more about SJI? email me at vsantamaria@luc.edu