

Immigrants to America

SOCIOLOGY CLASS TEACHES STUDENTS ABOUT THE U.S. AND EACH OTHER

BY JOSEPH MCLAUGHLIN • PHOTO BY LISA GODFREY

The assignment seemed simple enough: break into groups and write down the meanings of a dozen ethnic slurs displayed on the blackboard. The students in last summer's Immigrants to America class appeared ready. But the phrases they encountered — *Frenchified...* *Dutch courage...* *Irish club house...* *Greek ease* — left them stumped.

The students began to squirm. Like so many others who have trod Penn's leafy pathways, they were unaccustomed to not knowing the answer. The expressions, which attributed disease to the French, drunkenness to the Germans, crime to the Irish and laziness to the Greeks, had fallen out of common use nearly a century ago.

How did those antiquated idioms relate to modern immigration? After a lesson from doctoral candidate Elizabeth Vaquera, the class understood: immigrant ethnicities may change as successive waves arrive in America, but the false criticisms levied against them have remained the same.

Vaquera came to Philadelphia five years ago after completing her bachelor's and master's degrees in sociology at the University of Barcelona in her native Spain. Since then, she has completed the Penn master's program in sociology and expects to receive her doctorate next May. This was the second time she had taught the department's course on immigration, which typically attracts students whose parents or grandparents were born elsewhere.

"They think what they've gone through is typical of what every

immigrant family goes through," Vaquera says. "The class puts their experiences in context. Some of them learn what they've experienced is not as unique as they once thought; they don't feel as isolated. Others find out that not everyone shares their issues."

Vaquera lectured against the backdrop of a national debate on the future of immigration law that led to mass protests in cities across the country. At issue were competing congressional plans to deal with border security and the estimated 11 million illegal aliens now living in the United States.

Using those events as a springboard, the class traced the history of American immigration and compared previous arrivals to today's groups from Africa, India and many Spanish-speaking countries. Vaquera sees modern immigration as distinct from previous eras, in part because the new immigrant groups are wreaking havoc with the black-white divide that governs social stratification in the U.S.

In addition to teaching the ins and outs of a rapidly shifting topic that routinely consumed the front page of newspapers, Vaquera wanted to instill more than facts and theories in her young charges, many of whom were high schoolers participating in the Pre-College Program, offered for six weeks each summer through the College of General Studies.

"I remind them that scholars have tried to define immigration in certain ways, and I teach them the arguments that are put forth," she says. "I tell them, 'They are all very interesting arguments, but you don't

need to agree with all of them. You need to be critical of what people theorize.' Little by little, I think they are understanding that they can add something to what I tell them."

For the midterm research project, each student was required to interview an immigrant and relate that person's experience to concepts discussed in class. The assignment offered most students the opportunity to learn about relatives — fathers, mothers and grandparents who each possessed unique stories about their journey to permanent residency in the United States. Discussing their results in class, some students admitted that they had not known the basic details of their family history.

"I don't make them memorize things," Vaquera says. "I make them hook together elements from my lectures and what they read in books and newspapers. Instead of saying, 'Define immigration,' or 'What happened in 1965?' I want to ask questions that will cause them to develop their own ideas."

She will spend this year completing her dissertation, which studies how friendships formed by Hispanic high school students affect their educational outcomes. Her research, she says, has been strengthened immeasurably by her teaching. "It's a learning experience for me as much as for the class," Vaquera admits. "Even though I study the lives of Hispanic immigrants, I didn't have a global sense of what I was doing. Teaching made me realize how everything connects. It made me do research every day." ■

Elizabeth Vaquera (front row center) and the Immigrants to America class

