

The Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR) was founded in 1983. It represented a response to the rapid growth of the Latino population in the early 1980s and what a Ford Foundation working paper stressed as the need of policymakers and of Latinos themselves for "greater knowledge and understanding of their economic, social and political situation and of the roots of their disadvantage, and the development of an infrastructure that will increase their participation in the mainstream society.

At the time Latinos were nearly invisible in higher education and on the national scene. The 1980 Census, the first decennial census to ask all Americans whether they were of Hispanic descent, counted 14.6 million Latinos, comprising 6.4% of the population. Reliable information on the socioeconomic status of Latinos was just beginning to become available. In 1981 Latinos represented just 1.6% of full-time higher education faculty. In 1982 Latinos made up 4.5% of undergraduates and 2.2% of graduate students in the United States, and more than half of Latino college students were enrolled in two-year institutions. In 1983 Latinos received just 2.2% of doctoral degrees. Little funding was available for Latino-focused research, and policymakers often operated under the mistaken assumption that policies and programs developed for other minorities would also effectively serve Latinos.

In 1982, the directors of four Latino research centers met to discuss the status of university-based Latino research. They agreed on the need to reduce isolation and encourage cooperation and collaboration—rather than competition—among Latino scholars and research centers. The Inter-University Program for Latino Research was formally established in September 1983 to increase the amount of Latino-focused research and the pool of Latino researchers. The four founding members:

- Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin
- Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College, City University of New York
- Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California at Los Angeles
- Stanford Center for Chicano Research, Stanford University

The founders agreed that the organization would operate as an umbrella group linking Latino research centers, with the center directors providing oversight as IUPLR co-directors. They decided that its headquarters would rotate among member centers, with Stanford University serving as the first host site. Soon after, the Ford Foundation commissioned the development of issue-specific Latino research initiatives by several national Latino organizations. Among them was IUPLR.