A top U.S. Latino activist joins ASU

Recruiting Yzaguirre is major coup

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One of the country's most prominent Latinos will assume a new post with Arizona State University this month to develop a Hispanic-based community development institute and bolster the school's efforts to raise money, recruit minority faculty and students and accelerate partnerships with minority groups.

Landing Raul Yzaguirre, former head of the Washington-based National Council of La Raza is a major coup for ASU and the region: It will raise the profile of the school, which has aggressively sought to enhance its reputation nationally and with Hispanics.

Yzaguirre was a powerful lobbyist for the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights group and built a reputation fighting for minorities in Congress, in corporate boardrooms, schools and non-profits throughout the nation. He brings decades of experience with public policy and thousands of names and numbers in his Rolodex, which will position educators and non-profits to vie more competitively for money, university and Latino leaders said.

"We expect him to be an advocate, both inside and outside the university, for the issues that are of greatest importance for the Hispanic community and the state of Arizona," ASU President Michael Crow said. "His leadership will enhance ASU's efforts in providing academic and career opportunities for Hispanics."

Yzaguirre will earn $75,000 yearly as part-time presidential professor of practice in community development and civil rights in the College of Public Programs, officials said. He will be appointed Jan. 23.

Yzaguirre, 65, fought for civil rights, housing and education for Latinos during his three decades as leader of NCLR. With millions of Hispanics on his side, Yzaguirre transformed the organization from a broke, unknown group into one of the most influential in Washington. When he stepped down as president and CEO in December, offers from universities and institutions around the country poured in.

But Crow's vision to embed the school into the Latino community beat out other offers.

Yzaguirre will focus mostly on the creation of the Hispanic research center, which will be built within the new 15,000-student ASU downtown campus. Using his relationships with local non-profits, Yzaguirre will partner social service front-liners with residents and scholars to connect research with lives. The marriage could translate into more livable communities around the region by improving heath services, housing, transportation and education, he said.

"I can be a catalyst," Yzaguirre said. "Community development . . . is not just about Hispanics. It's about the entire community. I can bring forces together, bring talent together."

His name alone can capture millions of dollars from corporations around the nation for local non-profits, Valley social service leaders believe.

"He will be able to draw corporate support (for non-profits) because he has friends in high places all over the country," said Luz Sarmina Gutierrez, president and chief executive officer of Hispanic-based Valle del Sol, which provides family services. Yzaguirre knows the Valley well: Since the creation of NCLR here in 1968, he travels to the Valley frequently to meet with lawmakers and non-profits. His established relationships here helped bring 23,000 Hispanics to its national convention in...
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downtown Phoenix last summer. He says he will become an even more familiar face in the community, leading seminars, lecturing and mentoring students like Ana Contreras.

Like hundreds of other young Hispanics, she has watched Yzaguirre lobby lawmakers on Capitol Hill in support the DREAM Act, fair wages for farm workers, bilingual education and fair voting rights. Who better, she said, to empower young students, mentor them and advise their organizations.

"Some students feel that the power and passion with the Chicano Movement has died down," the 20-year-old Avondale junior said. "We've all been looking for what we call the Chicano Renaissance."

Yzaguirre could drive that revival for Latinos, she believes. After all, he spent his life putting Hispanic issues center stage. He became an activist at the age of 15, organizing American G.I. Forum Juniors during his segregated childhood in a small town outside of McAllen, Texas. That passion for activism led him to become one of the Hispanic community's highest-powered executives, who has the ear of the country's top lawmakers and corporations.

"You can find his fingerprints throughout the nation," Democratic Congressman Ed Pastor said from Washington. "He took NCLR, a small group, and gave it national recognition."

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