
“Now What?”: Drowning in the American Dream Mural

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Talavera-Ballón working on the mural. Photo credit: Dr. Gabriela Fried.

“Drowning in the American Dream” is a mural produced at Cal State LA, painted by Claudio Talavera-Ballón, a Peruvian artist based in the Bay Area, depicting the challenges of migrant border crossings. The project originated in a collaboration between faculty and students of the Latin American Studies Student association (LASS) and the artist, with the Dreamer Center and the Cross-Cultural Center, and co-sponsored by the Sociology Department, the College of Natural and Social Sciences (NSS), the College of Ethnic Studies, the Ethnic Studies Student Group (ESSG) and the University Library, hosted by the Special Collections and Archives Division. The mural project culminated in an inauguration event at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library at Cal State LA in the Fall of 2022.

The purpose of the project is to instill pride and raise awareness of migrant rights. Dr. Gabriela Fried, the head of the

project and professor in the Latin American Studies Program and the Sociology Department, plans to circulate the mural to different university locations. She also looks forward to having more collaborative efforts between students, faculty, university organizations, and the community. Dr. Fried also envisions future murals covering blank walls at the university bringing “more color to the campus” (Ivie 2022). The mural belongs to the office of Latin American Studies and is currently on display in the JFK Memorial Library.

Many of Talavera-Ballón’s pieces capture the experiences of migrants (Ivie 2022). “Drowning in the American Dream” brings to light important stories experienced by migrants crossing our border. It depicts migrant families crossing rivers and deserts to greener pastures. The artist illustrates border patrol on horseback, representing the hardships that migrants face against those in power. The mural also displays students in graduation attire, concluding a story of achievement for the children of immigrants. Butterflies scatter the mural, a symbol reflecting migrants traveling to safer homes.

The author Hiroshi Motomura (2007) argues in his book, *Americans in Waiting*, that immigrants wait in limbo for their opportunity to gain legal status while acting as full members of American society. Motomura’s ideas and Talavera-Ballón’s work reflect the lives of Dreamers and other immigrant students from different parts of the world here at Cal State LA.

In the center of the mural, a student depicted in graduation attire holds a sign that asks, “NOW WHAT?” Cal State LA, home to both this journal and the mural, serves many students who are immigrants themselves or belong to immigrant families. Immigrant students here at Cal State LA enroll in the United States education system, where they experience the culture, learn the language, and achieve all that is expected of them. These students may consider themselves Americans, but their legal status does not reflect that. After enduring migration, growing up in the United States education system, and living in the constant stalemate of migrant legality, it is understandable for this student to ask, “NOW WHAT?” While there are many opportunities ahead of them, they may be limited due to their legal status.



"Drowning in the American Dream" as photographed in the JFK Library at Cal State LA. Photo credit: Victor Mojica.

If you find yourself asking the question "now what?", you are not alone. If you are a Cal State LA student seeking help, visit the Dreamer's Resource Center, where they can connect you with CARECEN for legal services. If you want to learn more about migrant issues and how to support the community, visit the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Services.

REFERENCES

- Ivie, Victoria. 2022. "Live Mural Painting Sparks Community and Culture on Campus." *University Times*. Retrieved March 16, 2023 (<https://csulauniversitytimes.com/live-mural-painting-sparks-community-and-culture-on-campus/>).
- Motomura, Hiroshi. 2007. *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.