

Latino Studies Program

by Maria Cristina García and Mary Pat Brady

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Thank you for inviting us to report on Latino students' concerns about the campus climate. The information in this report comes from conversations with students over the past year in my capacity as professor, member of the Latino Studies program, Faculty Fellow at the Latino Living Center, and advisor to student organizations. Professor Mary Pat Brady of the English department also contributed to this report, and included information based on her numerous contacts with undergraduate and graduate students. In preparation for this report, we also jointly conducted interviews with specific groups of students.

Counseling

Foremost on the list of concerns expressed by Latino undergraduate students is the need for greater opportunities for counseling, both academic and personal. The university puts a great deal of effort into recruiting Latinos to diversify the student population, but not as much effort into programs that will assist these students to do well and graduate. Of course, not all Latino students require specialized attention (contrary to popular perception), but some do require some extra help and students feel that the current programs are inadequate. Of particular concern to students in the sciences are the so-called "gateway courses" (e.g. CHEM 207) which tend to weed out students who are considering medical school. Too many students are abandoning their dreams of becoming physicians because of their performance in these very large, impersonal classes, as well as poor advising on the part of their assigned advisors. With more personalized attention, and tutorial assistance, a greater number of students would persevere with a pre-medical course of study.

Students in the Engineering College seem to be the most satisfied with the academic counseling available to them. In fact, every engineering student we talked to had only praise for EMPO, the Engineering Minority Programs Office. They recommended that other colleges duplicate their services. Students in the Arts College are aware that COSEP is available to help them, but the perception is that COSEP is a program designed specifically for African American students. Some report that they didn't feel welcome there during their initial visit, despite recent attempts by COSEP to diversify its staff, so they are not likely to return there for help. Instead, they turn to other students—or a sympathetic professor—to give them advice about courses, feedback on their writing, grant proposals, etc.

Students would also like to see a psychologist of Latino heritage on the staff of Gannett (and more psychologists in general). Gannett claims that students who request a counselor are accommodated within a week, but some students we talked to reported having to wait as long as a month to see someone. Students expressed a preference for meeting with a psychologist who was Latino because they feel s/he might better understand the unique challenges they face at a university. Many of our Latino students are the first in their families to attend college, and they face an incredible amount of pressure to do well. They are often told by "Anglo" students—and sometimes even their professors—that they are here only because of affirmative action and are taking the place of more "qualified" students. So the pressure to prove themselves is enormous, and they must deal with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. In addition, many of our students are coming from Texas and California, and they can't rely on family networks for support. When life becomes stressful, they can't hop on a Shortline bus or get in their car and visit family for a weekend, like so many Cornell students do; they're lucky if they can visit their family twice a year. For these and other reasons, students would appreciate a Latino counselor on staff at Gannett, and workshops that address the issues they must confront in their day-to-day life here.

Campus Security

The racial incidents that occurred on campus last year are not isolated occurrences. Just last week, a group of students watching television in a room at the Latino Living Center were forced to call the police when a group of inebriated students, yelling racial comments, tried to climb through their window. As Faculty Fellow, I have witnessed students living at or near the Class of '22 dorm (where LLC is presently located) make racial slurs when they hear a student speak Spanish or play a CD of *tejano* or *salsa* music. Despite the occasional acts of hostility directed against them, the students at LLC make every effort to invite students of other dorms and program houses to their activities in an attempt to educate and break down barriers.

Latino students would like to see the campus better lit at night, as well as more emergency phone booths. They would also like police to respond more quickly to their calls. College life is tough enough without having to worry about being harassed and threatened.

Recruitment of Faculty/Commitment to Ethnic Studies/Curricular issues

Students want assurance that the university is committed to diversity, and this commitment can be demonstrated through the hiring of more Latino professors across colleges; support for ethnic studies programs and program houses; and the continued recruitment of minority students.

There are few professors of Latino heritage on campus who can serve as mentors, or whose specialties allow them to teach courses relating to race/ethnicity. Most of these professors are in the Arts college and students outside of A&S would like to see more Latinos hired in their colleges, especially if they can teach courses that can be cross-listed with Latino Studies. Of course, Latino students don't have to go to Latino professors for mentoring. But based on information from exit surveys, there is a general perception among students *as a whole* that professors are more concerned with their research than their teaching and advising. If Latino students come to us specifically for guidance or help, it's because they assume that we are more willing to offer that assistance. At the same time, Latino professors are not just here to help a specific constituency, and we reach out to all our students. Consequently, just about every Latino professor that we talked to admits feeling "burned out" from our different roles as scholars, teachers, mentors, advisors, personal counselors, etc. We have also found that just about every Latino professor we've talked to has considered leaving.

Students want the Latino Studies Program and the Latino Living Center to offer them a "safe space" where they don't have to feel constantly on guard; at the same time, they realize that these entities serve the entire university. Contrary to popular opinion, they do not desire to segregate themselves, nor do they perceive LSP as a program just for Latinos. They frequently complain that they rarely see an "Anglo" student in their LSP courses. They want LSP/ LLC to make a vital intellectual contribution, and both entities actively encourage attendance at their activities by a broad range of people. Exit surveys conducted by the university, however, reveal that only a small percentage of graduating seniors ever attended a lecture or activity on campus that could be labeled "multicultural". We must all do more to encourage students to explore these possibilities. The University's financial support to ethnic studies is important, of course. Just as important, however, is "symbolic" support: attendance by faculty, staff, and students who are not Latino.

Finally, Latino students request that faculty incorporate information on race/ethnicity into their courses, when appropriate. Some faculty assume that the existence of ethnic studies courses excuses them from including information on minorities into their own courses. Inclusion (or lack thereof) sends a powerful message to the student population about how professors feel about minorities and the legitimacy of ethnic studies. The university should consider setting aside special funds to help faculty revise their courses.

Special concerns of graduate students

Like the undergraduates, Latino/a graduate students feel the campus climate could be more welcoming. They would like to see a broadly based effort to offer diversity training as part of graduate student orientation. They similarly feel that staff and faculty could benefit from diversity workshops. They often find themselves patronized as "immigrant success stories" rather than understood as scholars.

Students are also concerned about the scarcity of library resources, the lack of net-connections to national Latino databases, and the general inattention to Latino studies beyond the College of Arts and Sciences. On this note, students would like to see more curricular attention paid to Latino/a issues, research, and scholarship. They would like to see a campus-wide speaker series that would broaden their knowledge. Possible topics include: 1) the impact of Latino immigration on labor relations; 2) the incorporation of scholarship by Latino legal theorists in critical legal studies; 3) the impact of changing demographics on hotel management; 4) the demographic transformation currently underway along the East Coast and throughout the United States and how it is affecting architecture, public policy, city planning, business management, and other areas.

Additionally, the graduate students would like to see the Graduate School initiate a broader minority-support initiative. Beyond further recruiting and attention to retention, which they see as vital, they would like additional educational support. They often feel themselves inadequately trained in vital areas when they arrive at Cornell and thus in need of an office offering targeted orientation, additional help with writing, grant writing and even time management workshops and counseling. Such an office could also help them obtain positions assisting professors with research and thereby improving their own research skills. They currently feel unwelcome or unaware of the help available to them. They also feel that the widely decentralized campus, with its uneven array of programs, works as an impediment to them in this particular case. Thus a graduate school office focusing on Latino affairs might, for example, sponsor seminars that would draw Latino graduate students from across campus together to study issues of common interest and would serve as a clearinghouse for information about various programs of interest occurring in the different schools. Law students, for example, don't often know what kinds of seminars are taking place in ILR or City Planning, but they often hear, after the fact, of events that might have been useful to them.

Similarly, the students would like to see the Latino Studies Program begin developing a graduate concentration in Latino/a Studies that would be broadly interdisciplinary. They would also like to see a graduate student added to the Latino/a Studies Advisory Board, and they would like to see additional faculty hired across campus to meet what they see as a growing national demand for research and scholarship focusing on Latino issues.

Finally, the students would very much like to see Gannett Health Services offer more psychological support including a counselor specifically trained to respond to Latino students. They would also like to see Latino graduate and undergraduate support groups developed.

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