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Inquiry Page Entry #1

The following is the mission statement of La Casa Cultural Latina:

The mission of La Casa Cultural Latina is to promote a welcoming and dynamic atmosphere through the development of educational, cultural, socio-political, and social programs that lead to greater recruitment, retention, advancement, and empowerment of Latina/o students. La Casa engages current and future leaders through mentorship, civic engagement, and the promotion of social advocacy.

The primary criticism of the previous mission statement is the failure to explicitly define the term “Latina/o students.” Ambiguous in nature, the term’s principal strength is that it does not exclude any particular “group” of students, implying in a sense that all Latinas/os are welcome. However, this vagueness is also a drawback, for it does not specify exactly who is welcome; thus, if an individual or group/type of individuals were barred from complete participation within the La Casa community, they would have no specific recourse upon which to fall back; they could not turn to the mission statement to defend their right to be involved. Instead of pointing to a particular, pre-specified “category” of Latina/o already included in the mission statement, they would have to go about proving their “Latina/ness,” showing exactly how and where they fit within the unclear term that is Latina/o.

As it stands, with the current mission statement, there is potential for certain groups to be prohibited equal access to La Casa Cultural Latina, because, while they might consider themselves Latina/o, due to the fact that the term is not defined, others might not deem them as similarly Latina/o. This inaccessibility could be as obvious as a

La Casa administrator's denial of access to a particular individual to a fellow student giving another student "the cold shoulder" because s/he does not feel that the other one belongs. (Note: in saying "access/accessibility" I do not mean "entrance," but access to all of the resources, be them scholarly, organizational, social, etc. that La Casa Cultural Latina provides.)

What does Latina/o mean? What categories of people does it include? In stating that "the mission of La Casa Cultural Latina is to promote a welcoming and dynamic atmosphere through the development of . . . programs that lead to greater recruitment, retention, advancement, and empowerment of Latina/o students," the reader immediately knows that non-Latinas/os are excluded from such an objective. So, perhaps the better question might be to ask what exactly is a non-Latina/o.

Is language a factor in "Latina/ones?" Can an individual be considered Latina/o if s/he speaks English as their first language? Does speaking Spanish natively make a person any more or less Latina/o? Further, how does Brazilian Portuguese fit into the mix? Do Brazilians and/or Brazilian-Americans have a place at La Casa Cultural Latina? Yes, persons of Brazilian descent have ethnic differences unique from other South and Central American persons; but it would be erroneous to claim that only language creates these differences. Therefore, one must ask if a Brazilian is any more different than an Ecuadorian than an Ecuadorian is from a Mexican. And, regardless of whether the answer is yes or no, one must return to the original question: Is the Brazilian/non-Spanish-speaking individual "Latina/o" enough, and does s/he have a place at La Casa?

An additional element that must be taken into account is one's appearance, specifically the color of his/her hair, eyes, and skin. Are "White Latinas/os" any more or

less “Latina/o” than “Brown Latinas/os?” The Latin American world is not homogenous, and there are those who identify as being descendents of a certain Latin American region/country even though they appear to be White, or Asian, or Black, or any other phenotype. The difference, though, is that these “other” Latinas/os do not fit the socially constructed stereotype of what a “Latina/o” looks like, the dark skinned, brown-eyed, brown- or black-haired individual. So, again, are “White Latinas/os” less “Latina/o,” and is there a place for them at La Casa?

There is also the question of generations; how many generations separate the student that enters La Casa and his/her family members who initially immigrated to the United States? The point of the question is to determine how connected the individual is to the “homeland,” or how “Americanized” s/he might be. There are some people who appear Latina/o but are ethnically very distant from their ancestors’ previous, non-American culture(s). Yet, these same individuals might self-identify as Latinas/os. Like the previous issues, are these individuals any less “Latina/o,” and is there a place for them at La Casa?

Finally, the matter of partiality remains, whether a multiethnic person who identifies as fully or somewhat Latina/o is sufficiently “Latina/o” to be welcome at La Casa. Many multiethnic Latinas/os may appear stereotypically Latina/o, may have traditionally Latina/o first and/or last names, or may have varying degrees of Spanish (or Portuguese) fluency. On the other hand, though, they may have none of these attributes, but they may identify as at least partially Latina/o, especially with the societal strength of the “one drop rule,” when a person is categorized as being a full member of a particular non-American or non-White ethnicity solely by having just “one drop” of that “other”

blood. Are multiethnic Latinas/os less “Latina/o,” and is there a place for them at La Casa?

What if an individual self-identifies as Latina/o but is not seen as such? The mission statement of La Casa Cultural Latina does not ensure his/her place within the La Casa population. There is the potential for a large number of students to be excluded from a community that perhaps the La Casa administration wants to include. To ensure that nobody is (directly or indirectly) turned away from or turned off to La Casa, I suggest that the mission statement include at least a footnote that states that “Latina/o” includes all Latinas/os, regardless of language, color, generation, full-bloodedness, etc. In doing so, each and every U of I Latina/o is guaranteed (on paper at least) a place at La Casa Cultural Latina.