Introduction

"Look for your passion and follow it, come what may, but do it from a Latino perspective, where you are guided by the effect of what you do on your family and your community. Being Latino is emotional, is spiritual, and to me it means moral structure: what is good, what is right, what is justice. All this will become more important as we go through some tough times ahead. We need to build on that."
-David Hayes-Bautista, Author

The cool breeze whistled through the trees on that early afternoon in August. I remember the day vividly, because that pesky wind tried to blow my research paper away that was firmly gripped between my two hands. I was excited that all of my hard work had come to this moment, jamming to the tunes of my mp3 player without a care for the people staring at me oddly. To walk from my apartment to the place where the research was due, the Office of Minority Student Affairs, I had to make my way through Nevada Street, the location of all the cultural centers and where all of my research had taken place. I glanced to my left and stopped cold in front of La Casa Cultural Latina. It was here that I had my epiphany. All of the interviews rushed back into my head in a flash. “Yeah, I’ve been to La Casa,” echoed in my mind. “The Blue Room is hot,” flashed another. “La Casa is the cultural center I’ve attended,” an interviewee commented. Each student I interviewed mentioned something about this institution in front of me. Why? What makes these students who had little experience with cultural centers to all choose La Casa as their introductory means in an experience within a cultural house? As my mind raced through these inquiries, I knew my work was not complete. I had investigated
the African American Cultural Program and the Asian American Cultural Center, but in the process I found the interconnectedness between all of the centers in the psyche of the student population. The purpose of this inquiry is threefold. The first is to add La Casa Cultural Latina to the overall inquiry about the cultural houses. The second is to understand if La Casa is the prototype for all cultural centers or whether that viewpoint is skewed. Lastly and most importantly I will investigate the active students within La Casa to understand who they are as people and what draws them to the institution.

**Methodology**

This research project is not the first of its kind. It builds on the findings of my previous research data and its direct inspiration from another inquiry project by Teresa Ramos and her fellow classmates from a course entitled Educational Organization and Leadership 572: The College Student. In her project, the students focused on “the importance and function of cultural houses at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign” (qtd. in Ramos, 2004) by focusing on La Casa Cultural Latina and the African American Cultural Program. In my own past research, I did an ethnographic comparison between the African American Cultural Program and the Asian American Cultural Center. The purpose of the project was to understand student identity and how it shapes the mission statements of the cultural houses. This present research will help expound on the identity of students within an institution and help to show the practice of the mission statement within the lives of the active participants at La Casa Cultural Latina.

This project uses an ethnographic research methodology. The main methods of gathering information were through observations and through interviews. Throughout this
inquiry I will use the term active student which is defined as a student that participates in La Casa Cultural Latina on a regular basis, whether through programming, a student staffing position, or the student using La Casa as their social space. Through the closing months of 2006 I interviewed eight students on various dates and times. Six of these students are active participants at La Casa Cultural Latina. One of these students is a former active participant of La Casa Cultural Latina. The last student is not an active participant at La Casa. I knew only one of the participants before the inquiry, and this was because it was crucial to the study so I could understand the sense of a person walking into La Casa and understand the emotions of my previous interviewees entering into a new environment. The choice of environment was important to the inquiry because the six active participants were all interviewed at La Casa engaging in some sort of work for the cultural house. By observing their actions coupled with student interviews, I could gain insight into activities that I could not have if the interviews were at another site. The two students who were not active participants were not interviewed at La Casa because environmental observation was not needed. Their opinion is valued and for this I only made note of their interview and not their reaction to the environment.

Students were the focus of my research. Because racial background is necessary to the study I interviewed only students of Latino descent. One self identified of Mexican and Spanish descent, wavering to decide whether to include her Spanish side, another three students identified as Mexican. One student identified as Puerto Rican in a side comment and there was also a reference to Dominican, but whether she meant herself could not be determined. Another student referred to himself as Puerto Rican-Anglo, while another self identified as Mexican American. One student did not self identify for
various reasons, so my observation will identify her as Latina. For the purposes of this study I did not believe it was necessary to balance the number of males and females, but interestingly all of the active participants I interviewed were female while the two non-active participants were male. Exploring the impact of gender on attendance is not the focus of this research, however it may be something to explore in a future project. Numbers have been constructed to conceal identities on controversial topics because I did not want to offend individuals by giving an inaccurate cultural pseudonym.

I followed a semi-structured interview template which allowed for students to focus on specific topics that they felt important. This template was changed after the first interview to give more depth and insight into the various backgrounds of students. I took the various student narratives and looked for specific themes in each of their answers. The first theme I examined was background information. I wanted to get a sense if there was commonality among the background experiences of the active members and see how it relates to them being involved in La Casa. These were explored in the initial questions about personal experiences at home and at the University of Illinois. However, because this research is not focused on student identity like the previous project, these questions were brief in nature. The main portion of this inquiry is to understand an institution via its active members. These questions consisted of understanding perception of campus environment and how it related to their active role in La Casa. I also looked for themes concerning the cultural centers effect in their daily life and how this translated to their influence within campus culture. The most significant question continued from Teresa Ramos’ and my own previous project is the same here. This question concerns the purpose of cultural centers and whatever this purpose may be, is it achieving it. By
comparing active La Casa participants’ answers, they may give some insight into that very query.

Identity plays an important part in any ethnographic study, and my partiality and biases are no exception. My racial and ethnic identity as an African American plays an important factor in developing relationships with the interviewees. I did not know any of these individuals except one, and my background causes me to question if they would have opened up more or less to me had I been of a different origin. Gender may also have played a large part in some of my assumptions and/or responses. As a male who interviewed six females, I came to question whether I would have had different responses had I interviewed males. Although my background may have influenced some reactions or responses, I maintained this project at a scholarly level and hopefully this work will reflect that sentiment. Understanding the dynamics of how race, ethnicity, gender, economic background, and sexuality are all related is extremely important in any ethnographic research, and I have done the absolute best to relate multiple viewpoints (Files, 2006).

Throughout this paper I will use Latino or Latina to refer to members of the group who are of Latin, Caribbean, or Spanish descent. The term is used rather than Hispanic because it is a term that was forced on many people of Latin descent by the government. Hispanic excludes a lot of native peoples, mixed Latin peoples, and people of non-Spanish descent (Martinez, 1992). The term Latino allows for flexibility as far as encompassing a larger group under an umbrella term. The large problem with umbrella terms is that it diminishes the role of respective cultures within the Latino population. For purposes of this research, I wish to stress the diversity within the histories and cultures
within the Latino community and the use of this term comes with the utmost consideration.

**Latino/a Student Experience**

Before I could understand what it meant for a Latino to be an active participant within La Casa, I needed to understand what it means to be a Latino within the university. Being Latino is more than just being part of a culture. It is something broader in scope, a spiritual and emotional connection to one’s roots. It is vibrant and passionate, and this essence does not falter when it reaches the stage of higher education. I will explore this identity in several methods. The first will be exploring the evolution of Latino individuals and the common themes within the different backgrounds and the transition into academia. Secondly, I will analyze the problems Latinos face when transitioning into the campus community. Lastly, I will reflect on the Tacos and Tequila incident and how its perceptions and direct influences effect the Latino population at the university.

In the realm of higher education, many Latino student needs are misunderstood. By understanding personal narrative of a student, specific education needs can be fostered and cultivated by the institution and provide faculty members insight into how to approach the lack of diversity in the college sphere (Reyes and Rios, 2005). Oscar Martinez’s video, *Latina/o Identity: 1992 Protests*, catalogues a section of the video concerning student identity. It is necessary for the faculty and administration to understand not only its student population, but also crucial to understand the different challenges that face diverse groups.

My first questions from my first template were not very engaging. I began with questions that just focused on the cultural centers and the student opinions of these
cultural houses. However, I soon began to realize that before I could understand the institution, I had to understand who the people were inside the institution. This was when I scraped my first template and created a new one that asked a couple simple questions on student identity. By installing this component into the interview, it gave me a method of understanding my interviewee while also fostering a temporary bond because many people love to talk about where they come from whether to brag or to show how they have achieved from their humble beginnings.

“I’m from Chicago!” F5 emphatically stated. “Really, me too…what part?” F6 commented. F5 and F6 are two Latinas who have student job positions at La Casa Cultural Latina. These two young women expressed an instant bond with each other and myself as soon as I asked the question of “Where are you guys from?”. F6 identified herself instantly as a Mexican from a specific community in the Chicagoland area. For her, personal background was an extremely important facet of her life. Also, I perceived strong Chicana ties with her neighborhood and family because of some of the comments she made about “white-washed Latinos”, which will be explored later. F5 may have sensed this sentiment by being in the same room with her. When asked to identity her background, she expressed uneasiness in identifying her Spanish side after explicitly defining herself as Mexican. The intimacy of the room placed her close in proximity to the other interviewee, and maybe she felt uncomfortable in identifying her part Spanish origin in front of someone who was very prideful of her Mexican heritage. As I sat facing these two students who had gone into a tangent about their beginnings, I took in the environment. Behind my interviewees were two computers on an old, dingy desk. The room itself was very plain, a stark contrast to the rest of the building, but understandable
because it was an office-type room. We sat in the form of a triangle, I at the point while the other two were directly across from me chatting. It seemed as if they were really excited to speak to me, possibly because otherwise they would be doing some work at the computer instead. As I made my way back into the conversation, I realized the talk had moved to high school. “How did you both decide that the University of Illinois was your destination?” I asked. F5 answered that she went to a college preparatory school in the suburbs in the latter year of high school. Her advisors pushed her to go to college, and through her cousin who went to UIUC she decided to come to school there. “My mother pushed me to go to school. It wasn’t even a question,” commented F6. She laughed and stated that she never intended on coming to the University of Illinois, but that issues with money forced her to choose this school. “Money!” F5 echoed in laughter. She reflected that it was a huge reason she came to the university as well. Finances were also brought up by another interviewee. M1 came from a largely different background than the other two Latinas. He said that his suburb was “very White” and rural in nature as opposed to growing up in the city. However, financial reasons are what pushed him to come to the school. “It’s the best school for your buck,” he commented as he sat across from me in the Illini Union basement area. Surrounded by the buzz of people walking in to eat at the restaurants, he relayed to me that he was a multiethnic Latino or mixed Puerto Rican descent. “I grew up in an environment that communicated to me that I was Latin everyday,” he sighed. “I have strong ties to family in Puerto Rico.” Strong ties to family were relayed by M2 as well. “It’s a different culture there. It is more laid back there than here. For example, you all take your sports way to seriously,” he laughed, commenting on the difference of American and Mexican culture. M2 is a native of Mexico who came to
America for the educational system. “When I first came here I celebrated my birthday alone. That was when I was the most home sick,” he sullenly reflected. This small narrative shows his strong connection to his family and his distinct viewpoint on a difference between Mexican and American cultures. Interestingly enough, he identified as Mexican American. While he excitedly spoke about going home for Christmas break, I wondered about the different roles identity played in the lives of these students. While only scratching the surface of these different identities, it is clear that they help shape and mold the experience of individuals on campus. Two themes have emerged from these interviews. The first is that strong family ties are very important. From F6’s narrative about her mother pushing her towards school, to M2’s reflection about missing his family, it can be seen that family ties are an important facet in the Latino community. The other common theme was the financial reasons for coming to the University of Illinois. While all of my participants had the opportunity to go to other institutions, they chose the University of Illinois because of its high prestige with a lower cost than some other universities. However, when each student made their way into the university, some distinct problems were immediately noticed.

Problems for minorities in White universities have been rampant since the doors opened via the Brown v. Board ruling. The reason lies in the misunderstanding of Latino needs in academia. While the demographics of Latinos have increased exponentially high, more than 25% in Illinois alone, higher education still has very little access points for the population as a whole. Latinos only make up 6.6% of members in four year institutions and only 6.3% of Bachelor degree recipients (Chapa, 2006). The Latino population is growing in locations all across the country. By 2007-2008, Latinos will
constitute the largest percent change of an enrolling high school demographic, which is 21%. This means that 9.2 million Latinos will be enrolled at various high schools across the United States (Chapa, 2006). As one can imagine, it becomes increasingly critical to understand the needs of a large student constituency in high school, because these 9.2 million Latinos will be attending many various colleges, including the University of Illinois. At the University of Illinois, Latinos compose less than 6% of our undergraduate student population (Department of Management of Information, 2005). This means that 1 in 17 undergraduate students is Latino/a, while for every 25 undergraduate students 17 of those are white (Chancellors Report, 2003). For the last three years, the Latino student population on campus has been reduced slightly from 6.01% to 5.99%. In 1991, the graduation rate at the University of Illinois was 2%. In 2003, the graduation rate has only increased to 4% (CR, 2003). As seen through these numbers, there are serious concerns with the recruitment, retention, and graduate rates of Latinos on this campus. The administration needs to turn its eyes towards this situation, because as the demographics of the university changes, so do the practices of a discriminatory campus that practices institutional racism at its core.

This institutional racism promoted by the ill concern of the administration towards Latino student needs cultivates an oppressive environment. This is the reason many people, Latinos and otherwise, was lead to protest in 1992. Some students proposed a list of demands to the administration, such as increasing faculty, increasing recruitment in the city, money for various Latino support programs, and more resources for Latino students such as the expansion of the Latin and Caribbean Library. After there was no response by the administration, a large group of students participated at a sit in at the
Henry Administration Building. After a long time of passive protesting, an administrator came to tell take several students into a meeting where they were told “the demands would not be met and they are required to go home.” The protestors continued to sit, unfaltering, but the administration called the police. The police used abusive means to remove the protestors, using batons and dragging people by their limbs. There was one report of a man being pepper sprayed and then beaten to the point where he needed to be hospitalized for several days. Three students were put in jail, while many others suffered disciplinary action from the university. This 1992 protest was an attempt in educating the administration and faculty about the abusive nature of the campus environment. Latino student needs are falling on deaf ears, and this continued apathy towards the population increases the evolution of a negative atmosphere at the university.

This negative atmosphere has continued to grow and has manifested an ugly result. In early October of 2006, the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity and the Delta Delta Delta Sorority engaged in a themed party known as Tacos and Tequila. Certain members of their organization classified the party as a celebration of Mexican culture. Some participants came to the party dressed in sombreros and t-shirts to look like “Mexican migrant workers.” Another female dressed in a top with a pillow underneath to imitate a pregnant Mexican female. Many of the women wore Mexican flags around their wastes, and flags and piñatas hung from the ceiling, one of which held a picture of the virgin Mary, a sacred religious symbol. The participants in this party all drank tequila and ate tacos, engaging in drunken ruckus and recklessness. The entirely White attendance to this party further polarized an already tense issue between the majority population and minorities on campus. After this atrocity, the university administration did nothing. It was
not until a student rally in front of the Illini Union and the student protest that followed on October 31st that the administration took minimal action. F3 angrily mused thoughts concerning Tacos and Tequila. She referred to herself as “anti-frat.” F2 quickly picked up on her frustration. “I can’t believe they were a Jewish frat,” she mused about Zeta Beta Tau. The conversation was very fast paced in a room of four interviewees. Later in the interview, F4 referred to La Casa as a political institution which could help people come together to combat atrocities such as Tacos and Tequila. In my next interview, I was greeted with a similar reaction. “The school has been exposed as racist and that is the only positive outcome,” F5 muttered. F6 opened up the main university internet page with some of the things the university was doing about the Tacos and Tequila situation. “I don’t buy any of it,” she retorted. “It’s just a ploy by the university.” She went into further detail about the response. She stated that the cultural workshops and classes the fraternity members were punished with were not enough. She called out the student body by commenting on the lack of unity against this kind of action. M1 reflected a similar sentiment of disgust, but with a more relaxed attitude. “When I first heard about it, I was disgusted. I just thought, ‘Here we go again.’ I wasn’t surprised. I thought, ‘How could you?’ They’re just stupid, and ignorant.” M2 made a bitter laugh when I referred to it in his interview. “I wasn’t surprised by it,” he commented, “I thought, ‘sorority, frat, go figure’, you know?” He went on to comment about his happiness with the response of certain students and some registered student organizations who participated in the rally. Everyone that I interviewed expressed a negative viewpoint of the Tacos and Tequila scandal. Each student was disgusted by the action of these two mostly White institutions and the administrations lack of response to the action. Currently, meetings are still being
held with the administration over the issue. In an oppressive environment, gaining a sense of community becomes an important resource for students to progress in academia (Files, 2006). This sense of community is found, at least for six of the interviewees, at La Casa Cultural Latina.

**La Casa Cultural Latina**

When I first walked into La Casa, the first thing I did was map the space. Little did I know that just mapping the first floor itself would be a daunting task. There are literally objects everywhere, and each of the objects exhibits some type of color. Wherever there is a table, something is sitting on top of the table. As I walked in the main entrance, I observed some stairs in front of me that would take me to the second floor or a hallway that would take me to some offices in the back. I decided to explore the "student areas" a little more in depth. To my right was the seminar room which is decorated with colorful tables and chairs. There is a jukebox in the corner directly next to a foosball table. In the northwest corner of the room is a glass case and table displaying some artwork. There are stacks of chairs everywhere in this room it seems for if there was a speaker of some type. Behind this room was the kitchen area. The place looked like it had been used recently and often. There was clutter everywhere. There were all types of things on the counters and floors. While messy, this shows that the kitchen is a very active place. Walking back to the entrance area, I walked to a room directly across from the seminar room. This is called the Multi Purpose room. Beautiful murals decorate the entire room, while each is spouting a political message from its vibrant color. A entertainment center complete with speakers and a large TV are against the wall. Couches outline the walls, expressing a room meant for a more relaxed setting than the seminar
room. A piano sits in the corner, although it seems dusty and unused in some time. Just as I was finishing up my observations, a class was coming to use that space. I didn't get much information, but it seemed some type of cultural class aimed to educate international students. I spoke briefly with a young man with a thick accent and just talked about the class. He seemed excited to talk to me. If this really is a class, I hope there are more of their kinds, and it was great to see these international students sitting down in La Casa.

This environment reflects a comfortable atmosphere which purpose is making people feel welcome within its walls. I found this same welcoming attitude in the social spectrum of my first interview. As stated earlier, I interviewed my first participants in a group of four. Initially I had planned to only observe them, but because I wished to use some of their quotes I used them as interview participants. The four young women were decorating holiday items to put on the bulletin board. It looked as if normally the room was a seminar room, but it was brightly colored like the walls in the multipurpose room. The table in the middle of the floor was covered in arts and crafts, and the conversation was lively and festive. Before I started the interview F4 stated, “You’re not going to say anything negative about La Casa are you? If you are I’m not doing this.” It was a joking tone, but I could sense a hint of seriousness in her eyes. In another interview, F6 wanted to know if I was a spy for the administration. Apparently there is a rumor that the university is considering one multiethnic cultural center and advocating the removal of the individual cultural centers, but that rumor has little evidential base. She, like the other active members I interviewed, was very protective of the well being of La Casa.
Another aspect of this protectiveness was the promotion of La Casa in the personal narrative of interviewees. Some active participants responded negatively when asked about attending other cultural programs. F3 believed that the African American Cultural Program was a very tight knit group of students who were only open to members of the African American community. F2 reflected this sentiment, saying that she understands the closeness because “minorities stick together.” F3 continued on that she was opposed to the Asian American Cultural Centers policy that a space may only be rented if it is in the interest of the Asian American population on campus. “When they didn’t have a cultural center, they came over here to use La Casa for events all the time. Now that they got their own, we can’t even use it!” she vehemently commented. Other people responded differently to the question of other cultural centers. F5 contended that although she did not regularly attend other programs at the other centers, she did not hear about the programming at all. Advertisement was a big problem stated F6, and she too, had a problem with attending other functions. M1 had only been to the African American Cultural Program a couple of times when they had specific events that related to Latino culture. This negative perception and lack of initiative to participate in other cultural institutions is a disheartening result. While enthusiastically expressing program initiatives done in their own respective building, active participants subconsciously subvert the other cultural centers influence on campus.

The purpose of cultural centers was largely explored in my previous inquiry. The purpose here largely focused on education and whether this was the true mission of the cultural center. Balanced against this theory is the social standpoint, which states that students are using the cultural center as a haven in an abusive environment. A new third
viewpoint communicated by F4 is the cultural center as a political institution. She insisted that the purpose of the cultural center was to promote education, academic achievement, and political dialogue. F1 continued on about political cohesiveness amongst the cultural houses and spoke about coalition building as in the case of Tacos and Tequila. F4 responded by commenting on the problems with making people aware and the role that education plays. Although they were not arguing, each brings up good points concerning the purpose of the cultural center. If political dialogue is the goal, then education will take a smaller role in the stead of a center focused on attaining rights for its student population. If education is at the forefront, then political dialogue is substituted for an attempt to educate a population about culture. F6 vehemently supported the political stance. She stated, “Workshops and classes aren’t enough for these people. We can’t teach them anything. They can’t do anything if they don’t want to. Kids don’t grasp the education. They are supposed to be open minded but they don’t care.” Later when confronted with the question of La Casa as an educational, social, or political institution, she stated that it is “social, but leads to educational awareness about the political [aspect of being Latino/a].” An interesting point that she makes here is that there can be no political awareness if first there is no social space. F6 referred to “hunting for Latinos” when first arriving to campus. In a similar fashion, F1 commented about making friends when first coming into La Casa. From the attitude of the student making decorations, to the interview with the student employees, one could tell the active participants were very engaging people who enjoy talking about many different subjects. F5 made the perfect analysis on the attitude of the active participants towards La Casa. “It’s like a home away from home.” While initially contemplating the cultural center as just a social area, I
discounted its political effect. One can see with such acts as the Tacos and Tequila scandal that a cultural center can become an effective political tool.

**Outside the Realm of La Casa**

To balance the testimony of active participants within La Casa, I interviewed two individuals. One of these individuals, M1, is a former active participant within La Casa, but has left for various means. The second individual, M2, was interviewed to understand the role of an ethnically identified Latino who is not and has never been an active participant. These interviewees allowed for a point of view on La Casa Cultural Latina that was distinctly different than the active members, and many times their perceptions were not as ideal as those of the active participants.

M1 was a large participant in La Casa’s programs. It is a direct result of his background. As a multiethnic Puerto Rican from a small suburban town, he grew up as a largely unidentifiable member of the Latino community because of his skin color. In fact, his father changed his second generation son’s last name to sound less Latino and more Anglo by converting the spelling and pronunciation of the name. Because of this, M1 was very excited to come to a campus with more Latinos to interact with than his hometown or his family in Puerto Rico. Once he arrived on campus, he became a member in an active Latino organization. He rose to the top of its ranks, volunteering and coordinating student meetings. M1 attended multiple programs and was actively involved in efforts concerning La Casa for two years. So why did he leave? “I never felt like I belonged,” he answered. This is a common answer amongst White students concerning cultural centers (Files, 2006), however, this active participant was relaying the same message. “I felt an implicit marginalization within La Casa. I always felt the realization of my lighter skin in
that space.” He continued about how he always considered himself Latino, but that he felt he had to justify his cultural background every time he walked through the front door. “I have strong ties with my Puerto Rican roots, and still I felt like I wasn’t Latino enough for them.” M1 stated that alternate perspectives were turned away. “It is a Chicano space. I understand the exclusiveness and the reasons why, but it is still exclusionary.” He referred to the current United States immigration debate as the reason for the tightening of the community. “The Mexican American population is the largest demographic on campus because of Chicago. You can feel the Mexican community in the atmosphere of La Casa. Even all of the paintings are Mexican in nature!” he laughed. “How would you feel as a student from Ecuador or some other nation in a place that cited itself for all Latinos but was filled with Mexican imagery?” In closing, he made sure to comment about how La Casa Cultural Latina is a “good thing” for the campus, however, its exclusionary policies strangle the entire Latino community on campus. He also stated that this close-knit community is evidence of the strain on the Latino community. M1 was by far the most interesting interview I obtained. He gives specific response to the term of “White-washed Latinos” F6 commented on within her interview. To understand whether his analysis of Chicano pressure within La Casa was an accurate one, I spoke to a Latino who was not affiliated with La Casa in any way.

M2 reflected a little of the sentiment that M1 projected, but not to the degree. He stated, “Most of the time I hear, ‘if you’re Latino, you need to go to this. Sure, they help everyone, but in a country where being a minority is negative I guess people should take advantage of the resource.’” M2 is a native of Mexico who is always hearing about programs at La Casa. When asked why he didn’t go, M2 laughed, “I had better things to
do.” He then seriously commented that work, classes, and homework are burden enough, and he does not have time to go to La Casa. Again, it seems like as a Latino there is some pressure to at least attend La Casa a few times. However, the magnitude of closeness was not nearly as reflected in M2’s narrative. When asked about the role of the cultural center, M2 spoke about the social aspect and also its educational uses. He stated, “People feel more comfortable around people of their culture.” He also stressed exposing others to culture. He finished by saying, “It is everyone’s job to educate. Culture is an important aspect of life. You can’t form a group or committee to educate about culture. Everyone has to contribute.” This attitude is a reflection of his attitude towards cultural centers. While forging a common bond with people in a cultural institution, fundamental educational change can only come from individual experiences rather than a seminar at a cultural house.

Conclusions

The mission statement of La Casa Cultural Latina states that it “promotes 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 (ODOS).” However, I have found some distinctly different results than what the mission statement claims. All of the interviewees had a different viewpoint of La Casa’s role within the university. Some viewed it as an educational institution aimed at promoting Latino cultural awareness within the Latino community and throughout academia. Other viewed it as a cultural sanctuary aimed at providing a social haven for students entering the university. Another viewpoint saw La Casa as a political institution that promotes dialogue about the
responsibility the administration has towards its Latino population. Various perceptions of its role do not mean that it stresses one mission over another. I would argue that La Casa functions in a combination of these three methods, catering to the needs of the student who uses its resources. The interesting question that this inquiry establishes is who is that student? Who is the student that is allowed within the institution to use the resources and become an active participant? M1 would argue that not all are part of this community. Other active participants made it clear that cultural centers are divided among racial and ethnic lines. Is La Casa an exclusionary facility? My observation would appear not, as I was welcomed into its doors with open arms. However, like any social space made up of individuals, personal biases and opinions can come to fruition. Clique formation is a natural cycle in any social environment, and unfortunately some people will be excluded. La Casa Cultural Latina and its active participants have a lot of work to do to make their institution more inclusionary, and the necessity of coalition building with the other centers should be stressed. However, at large La Casa does an excellent job in fostering community, and on a hostile campus it is nice to find a niche where students can be free.