

EPS 500

Final Project

“Are There Cycles of Latino Student Activism?”

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## Introduction

The predominance of institutions of higher education as the leading mechanism for social opportunity and mobility assigns them a critical role within US society. The inherent correlation that exists between access and representation within the University can be regarded as a description of broader society, to which the University is particularly connected to.

Considering the University as an organized structure, theory would establish that adaptations of curriculum, demographics and educational goals are reflexive of outside determinations of value. Yet, at the point in which the institution creates an environment independent of external pressure, it no longer adheres to the norms of society. Transformations of socio-political ideologies that initially excluded minority groups, and upheld a racialized/class hierarchy have no point of real entry within the institution except through extraordinary means. Thus, only through legal court rulings and social protest have the gates of the University slowly been pried open to reveal the drastic inconsistencies that exist in representation between society and the world of higher education.

In order to fully comprehend the status quo of the University on specific accounts, questions must extend beyond the scope of modern occurrences. A detailed historical analysis of University rhetoric and behavior must be balanced with a consideration of the wider socio-political events within a specified timeframe. Thus, inquiries on the position of Latinos, as students and faculty within the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign must be re-conceptualized along broader terms that explain both the experienced marginality within US society and higher education. Furthermore, the history of Latino student and faculty participation within UIUC is an interesting point of departure from normative discussions of Chicano/Latino student activism on account of the specific location within the Midwest. The majority of

academic research done in this area isolates and explains Latino student activism in terms of national origin, era and location, with a focus on the east and west coast, among Mexican-American or Puerto Rican students. These factors are seen as fundamentally intertwined and thus far most case studies done in this area observe the variables as one, with each contributing to the inherent nature and cause for activism. Yet, there exists a lack of analysis that takes into account the factors of location, identity and activism as separate variables that ultimately shape the nature of political incorporation and involvement by Latino students. Moreover, critical race theories and those of student protest fail to fully explain and situate the transformation of modern political Latino student activism in comparison to the past.

Taking this into account, the question arises as to how and under what circumstances are there any examples of unified political activity by Latino students on the UIUC campus. Furthermore, is there an existence of cycles in terms of goals, student demographics, or issues of importance that invariably affect the nature of activism? Framing the question in an ethnographic context, the next logical inquiry is, what do past and current Latino student perceptions of UIUC political activism reveal about role of location and identity in shaping the views and practices of activism? As stated previously, only through consideration of a broader scope that includes related events occurring on other campuses and among other racialized groups, can a more extensive theory be produced.

Through the comprehension of the connections of such issues, the initial foundations for a more inclusive and thorough theory of Latino student political activism can be discussed and created. The relevancy and importance of such developments in race and education theories within the academic world is fundamental to the continuance of efforts to gain valid and quality representation in US society.

Literature Review

The principal difficulty in going through the literature on the topic of Latino student political activism is the very word “Latino”. The majority of research has identified their work with regards to only one group and location, thus ignoring the variable of the modern broad based Latino student identity. Additionally, theoretical work on this issue either ignores distinction of race/identity in student activism as a whole, or categorizes all minorities within a single, separate rationale. There are several articles, journals and books dealing with the variables of either location/space, race and identity as factors within student activism, yet the intrinsic connection between the three has yet to be fully articulated. Thus, one finds it almost necessary to investigate several sources from various fields in order to create a coherent review of literature. This section will begin with an overview of “traditional” theories of student protest existent in the 1960’s and the era of social movements. The focus will then shift to works that deal with subsequent decades of protest (1980’s and 1990’s), and theories of Chicano and Puerto Rican protest with regards to the institution of higher education. The discussion will then conclude with UIUC Latino student activism and future implications of developing a comprehensive theory.

Donald Light and John Spiegel both studied the phenomenon of student protest in the early to mid 1970’s, at a point when the first stages of student protest were beginning to decline in occurrence and publicity. Thus, the basis of their work was to understand the factors that created an era of social consciousness and protests among numerous college campuses nationwide before a new era came into being. The essence of their work isolates the role and influence of the Great Depression and WWII generation on the development of activist ideals and attitudes of the social movement era.

“The postwar families experienced affluence as liberating. With it they liberated their children both materially and psychologically at the same time they supported political repression and ignored the cultural diseases of racism and imperialism. Their children, raised to be sensitive to their emotions and forced by protest leaders to confront these brutal contradictions, made good followers” (Light & Spiegel 7).

Through engaging a psychosocial historical analysis of that particular generation along with considering the implications of the ascendancy of the University as an accessible form of social mobility and experiment, Light and Spiegel develop a theoretical framework that places the historical experiences of the past as the primary motivation for student protest. They also characterize student activism as based within an ideology that favored celebration of the individual and independent over rigid solidarity within a single group.

Yet, as much as Light and Spiegel’s work contributes to the formation of a theoretical perspective by which to understand student protest, it failed to include analysis of either the Chicano or Puerto Rican movement that also occurred in the same era. The only mention of any non-white student protest dealt with white student participation in the struggle for civil rights on southern campuses. Thus, the relevancy of this work lies only in its development of a framework, yet the basis for that formulation is inherently biased for lack of a broader base of research.

Carlos Munoz’s work on the Chicano Movement includes a chapter and analysis of the Chicano student movement and the legacy it left for Mexican-Americans as students and leaders. Munoz’s chapter on the student movement focuses much more on the linkages between it and the overall development of national Chicano politics and organizations. Yet, he does provide very important detail on the convergence of consciousness and identity within students of higher education,

“In terms of identity and ideology, MECHA symbolized the emergence of a new generation of youth..The adoption of this new name thus encouraged students to see themselves as part of a new Chicano generation that was committed to militant struggle against US institutions that had historically been responsible for the oppression of Mexican Americans”, (Munoz 80).

His analysis also includes the struggle of students to establish Chicano studies programs as well as student support programs. Most importantly, he highlighted the often ignored and predicated conflict between African-American and Chicano students in attaining funds for recruitment and services.

Basilio Serrano’s article “A Chronicle of the Puerto Rican Student Union”, contributes a great deal of historical insight into the events of Puerto Rican student struggle to gain access to institutions of higher education in New York. This source is especially relevant because Serrano also includes an examination of modern Puerto Rican student protest in comparison to the late 1960’s. Within this analysis the author implicates the effect of a broader Latino/a student identity on subjugated specific Puerto Rican student issues, “Today, however, *Boriqua* students are less likely than in years past to ban together as a group independent of other Latinos” (Serrano 141).

Tony Vellela’s work focuses on the more recent era of student protest and activism on college campuses from the 1980’s until the early to 1990’s. Rather than developing a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of modern protests, his work centers on descriptive efforts that seek to illustrate the differences between the modern and older generation of students. Yet, the range of issues on which he bases his book are genuinely broad in range and do encompass the methods and experiences of modern student protests. Some of the issues he highlights are; Divestment, Central America, Berkeley, the CIA on Trial Project, Racism,

Women's Issues and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Rights. The chapters within the book are composed of a single issue where Vellela provides a neutral description of the issue at hand and then proceeds with student interviews on the topic.

“Campuses did quiet down, especially following America's retreat from Vietnam. The late 1970's were spent institutionalizing the movement gains of the preceding decade: women's centers and black student unions found permanent homes on many campuses...; student governments sought a greater role in university operations” (Vellela 11).

The relevancy of this work to the general question of this paper lies in its acknowledgement that modern student activism has shifted from the social movement generation.

Robert Rhoads looks into student protest specifically in the 1990's through an analysis that focuses primarily on multicultural protest. The introduction places an emphasis on developing a theoretical framework for analyzing and understanding in depth the issue of minority student political activism. The author decided to conduct five specific case studies of more recent student protests on five various campuses that dealt with five disparate issues, ranging from South African divest, to Bhurma, to most importantly, for the purposes of this paper, issues of equality for minority students. Rhoads work is imperative for understanding the subject of Latino student activism at UIUC because his methodology includes detailed case studies at various universities along with identity and institutional analysis.

“In other words, students need to recognize that cultural differences contribute a great deal to the kinds of social experiences they have (25)...The University is a place where knowledge is created, and because knowledge is clearly political..then the University is necessarily a site where identity politics will undoubtedly unfold” (Rhoads 27).

Thus, Rhoads work is one of the most related to this paper in the sense that he points to the struggle of identity politics in the new era and forms of student protest.

Arisve Esquivel's work on political Latino/a student activism at the UIUC campus from the 1970's through the mid 1990's is fundamental to this project because of the historical perspective and detail it provides. Esquivel was a student at the UIUC campus at the time of the 1992 protest and subsequently attended graduate school here. Through the use of memos, agendas, correspondence, and informants, Esquivel chronicled the entire process that Latino students went through in order to gain a cultural center in 1975. The 1992 sit-ins, preservation of the original La Casa murals, and the establishment of the Latina/o studies program were also highlighted within the thesis. An interesting point about this particular source was the fact that it seemed despite the decades that had passed since the first efforts of Latino student mobilization, it seems almost as if the same concerns and roadblocks continue to exist today. Furthermore, this source is very factual based, with focus given primarily to archival research, although Esquivel does attempt to place the discussion within Critical Race Theory. She also explores the implications of space and the formation of a more unified Latino/a identity. Yet, there still needs to be a deeper analysis given to this topic so that it can be framed within a theoretical framework that accounts for the various other student movements that were also occurring in this time period.

Renato Rosaldo's "Culture and Truth" touches upon the issue of representation with higher education and the need for re constructing the norms that have always seemed to exist. He speaks of the importance of the struggle for cultural studies programs and subsequent validation of other cultures that are not based in Europe.

“The moment classrooms become diverse, change begins. There is no standing still. New students do not laugh at old jokes...New pedagogies begin. New pedagogies include new courses and new texts” (xiii).

Thus, he situates the University as the location where struggle for access is met with societal change.

Ana Ramos-Zayas’s and Nicholas DeGenova’s work also explores the idea of space and identity being inversely related and essentially political. Their ethnographic study is situated within Chicago and explores Latino identity formation amongst Mexican migrants and Puerto Rican residents of Chicago. The inclusion of this work within the study is truly imperative given that the majority of Latino students who attend UIUC come from the city of Chicago. Thus, there must exist a correlation between the experience of the youth there and here at the University.

### Methodology

The research procedure employed for this particular project consisted of three types of research; historical, theoretical and ethnographic. The first type mainly consisted of visits and investigations of the student archives on campus. The information held within the archives was invaluable because it provided actual historical evidence of former student’s writing and the campus atmosphere. Through literary journals and publications produced by students which included poems and essays, they detailed the struggle for access and representation within the University in the past decades.

Theoretical research consisted of exploring several theories that were relevant to the subject area and identifying the elements they chose to focus on. Furthermore, through such research, the vacancies of popular student activism theory were identified.

The ethnographic portion of the research consisted of tape recorded interviews with a total of six students and one administrator. Of the six students, two, a male and female were former students who attended the University as undergraduates from 1992-1996. The other four, one male and three females were current students who entered in the fall of 2003. The interviews were conducted using a previously created protocol of questions that focused on individual perspectives of student activism and the role of the University. Interviews typically lasted a total of 90-120 minutes and were held in various places including a library, personal rooms and student centers.

### Analysis

One substantial finding in the course of historical research deals with the contents of Latino/a student publications, specifically “La Carta”. This particular student newsletter originated on the UIUC campus in the early 1980’s and was created and ran by students. It was composed of student contributions in the form of essays, interviews, art work and poetry. The majority of issues addressed within the publication were dedicated to political events that were occurring on campus and the need for a unified consciousness that strove for equal and fair representation within the University. The content of the newsletter has altered quite dramatically since the mid to late 1980’s. The current publications are very neutral, and when covering a somewhat controversial topic, the tone is very impersonal with no definitive stance. This is in great contrast to earlier publications which included much more of a focus on Latino activism.

Furthermore, the publication has shifted to a more mainstream form of editorializing. Currently, the publication is headed by a team of editors, reporters and opinion contributors, who then must get the final version of the publication approved before printing. This differs from the inherent origin of the paper that was created independent of faculty/administrator authorization.

Yet, the increase of University student resource funding of the publication may hold a partial explanation for the censorship of the newsletter, since in essence the University is paying for it. Additionally, current students hardly ever read the publication now whereas they tended to read nearly every issue their freshman year. This also has a lot to do with the newsletters being mailed to their dorms, where they now have moved out into apartments and houses.

In the process of historical investigation into the existence of cycles of Latino student political activism on the UIUC campus, it became natural to explore this question through a comparison/contrast procedure between the past and current generations of students. Thus, one of the most interesting findings in this area was the drastic differences in the socio-economic demographics of both groups. The generation of Latino/a students who attended the University in the early to mid 1990's came primarily from inner city public high schools in Chicago. There were a substantial amount of students recruited from the Northside of Chicago, from such high schools as Whitney Young, Lane Tech, Lincoln Park, and Clemente. There was also representation of other schools located on the Southside, and few students from the neighboring Chicago suburbs. Furthermore, the majority of students from this era were first generation college students and qualified for EOP programs as well as financial assistance.

The statistics on current Latino student socio-economic backgrounds reveal a complete alteration of the basic composition of Latino students as compared to the previous generation. The majority of Latino students come to the University through the President's Award Program which identifies underrepresented high school seniors with ACT score of 28 and over. Yet, as research suggests, scores on standardized test are highly correlated with a student's socio-economic status, where those with higher means tend to score better. Thus, the make-up of

current students is identified by a preponderance of second generation suburban Latinos/as, with the means of affording college tuition.

Thus, consideration of political cycles of student activism must take into account the fundamental transformation of the Latino student body on the UIUC campus. Whereas the previous generation struggled with issues of access, culture shock, representation/retention, academic difficulties and financial distress, the current generation of Latino students experiences a different type of struggle that is highlighted by the personal. Yet, the focus of student protest and student activism reveals the exact opposite. The previous generation focused on issues that would seem fundamentally personal, such as forging an identity and culture shock, while the current generation tends to place an emphasis on the outside migrant Champaign community and national political issues such as immigration reform and the Dream Act. The implications of this transformation at the UIUC campus must be compared to other campuses to see if this is the emergence of a national trend that could possibly define cycles of unified political activity.

Upon conducting student interviews, one of the most striking points of deals with current students perceptions about student political activism in general. What I found was those who I interviewed all stated that they "knew" they "should" be more involved on campus, in terms of rallies, etc., but they were not especially motivated, or in general did not feel personally connected to the issues. When prodded as to why they felt they "should" be more personally inclined with issues of marginality and racism on campus, the subjects were hard-pressed to pinpoint why they felt guilty. One such subject, Kyle\*, a Latino student stated on the issue of reporting racism or marginality on campus,

"I don't worry about it that much...I don't think its that important..because I haven't been

impacted by anything that big, unless I've been impacted by it, then I think, you know, I would let my voice be heard...If I really experience something..racial discrimination..something where it was, really, really, really yeah, obvious, you know, ok where its ohh that's racism by this teacher, or this organization, by this faculty person, I would..you know, let my voice be heard”

Another student, Daisy\* said,

“A lot of the times it is my schedule, but sometimes..I don't wanna go (giggles).like I know I should go and I know these are issues that affect us, and that we really need to push for..like the rally that they had for immigration....I'm just the one...who sits around and waits for it to change..”

On issues of experienced racism or marginalization on campus,

“When I was in the dorms, we got racist comments written on our dry-erase board...like we didn't know who it was, but we were the only... Mexican girls on the floor. Then we had a Mexican flag on our door, and one day, we came back and it was gone...I dunno”.

Kim's\* perceptions also followed the same theme, on being involved with traditionally politically active organizations on campus,

“I wouldn't use MSA as an example because I feel that their...means for educating the... rest of the campus about whats going on..isnt very accurate..like I mean I don't see the point in selling *pan de muertos* for Day of the Dead..like how are you teaching anyone that..like you know?”

On issues of perceived inter-Latino relations,

“I feel that there is segregation within the Latino community, as far as if you're a Latino

from the suburbs, or if you're a Latino from the inner city..... or if your Greek and your not...like there's a lot of segregation in that. I mean..there's your exceptional people that just don't allow themselves to be segregated and they are just friends with everyone...I think segregation within Latinos is what you make of it".

On issues of racism on campus,

"Again, I feel I have not experienced racism on this campus mostly in part because of..ummm....like my appearance..like I'm very...like the things that I wear..like you could tell that Im not...like..do you know where I'm coming from?...Like I'm being honest..like I'm very flashy with brands, very like...up to date with styles, so I don't think that really...A lot of white people have seen me around, and they know I'm not like your "typical" Latino, like..they know I'm from the suburbs, because of the way I act, the accent that I have..differentiates me a lot from the majority of Latinos on this campus".

Thus, current student's perceptions of racism and institutional representation is not seen as something that is inherently political. Rather than connect experiences to their identities as a group on campus, they see themselves as individual students who come here with the purpose of attaining a degree. Additionally, their perceptions of Latino student activism is based upon the notion that organizations lack coherent structure and goals, thus they hesitate to participate within them.

Further analysis into the presence of cyclical Latino student activism was especially propelled by a particular interview with an administrator who knew the issues of minority students on campus. This administrator began the "interview" with an important insight into the limitations of only focusing on a period of one decade. Bob\* drew critical links between the role of activism on this campus and the real inherent ties to the city of Chicago. Through providing an

in depth history of the arrival of Latino students to the campus, he placed the influence of the city as an important variable in shaping the goals of past Latino student activism. Bob believed that in essence, the specific location and experience of living in Chicago impacted the lives of the students in a way that was unique to this campus.

### Implications

In considering the question of whether Latino student activism on the UIUC campus occurs in a series of cycles, it becomes apparent that the answer to the question resides not only in analyzing the actions of Latino students within the setting of the University, but also in their linkages to Chicago. According to DeGenova, space is fundamentally political because it is not only the scene of struggle, but also the “stakes” of it. Both the University and Chicago have served as the location where Latino students engage in a continuous geopolitical struggle, where rights of space and access are always under scrutiny. Thus, notions of cyclical Latino student activism within UIUC must be conceptualized not only in terms of identifying key changes in demographics, perceptions and University actions, but also along a broader theoretical framework. Existing theories of student protest and activism do not account for the unique experiences of Latino students, and tend to make the specifics of protest fit the provisions, rather than having it explain it. Furthermore, theories of Chicano and Puerto Rican student activism are limited by their inherent focus both in ethnic group and location and critical race theories are too broad in scope and are not custom to Latino students. Thus, we are presented with the dilemma of engaging a new theory of Latino student activism that makes the link between race, space and perspective.

A point of interest within *Latino Crossings* lies in the similarity of thought in both researched groups on the subject matter of the youth in contradistinction to themselves as

immigrants. Each group voiced opinions that characterized and thus subjugated the U.S. raised Latino youth as being culturally inauthentic, as well as prone to violence and crime. These particular notions are fundamental to future research on the continuance of identity formation, since it will be the later generations of the immigrants that will find a connection in terms of identity based on how they are perceived by society, as well as by their own families. Taking *Latino Crossings* as a starting point for the development of a new theory, the University must be looked at as a unique setting for the emergence of a potential widespread political Latino identity.

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