

# Who's Union Anyway: Exploring Cultural Connections at the University of Illinois Through the Illini Union Board

## Eric Lugo

### EVOKE

#### About the Ethnographer

My name is Eric Lugo and I am currently in my final year at the University of Illinois leaving with a BA in Anthropology and an Interdisciplinary minor in Latina/Latino Studies. My intent in with Anthropology is slightly different from the norm in that my pursuit is actually in the realm of Advertising. Specifically I hope to use anthropology to explore meanings of target markets and begin to redefine advertising approaches to Latina/o ethnic enclave. Anthropology, afterall, provides great insight into exploring consumer trends and developing campaigns of social relevance to the growing markets that clients are now seeking. My research interests at this point in my life revolve greatly around music (Latin music specifically). Two specific ideas I have begun to explore in recent months are: 1, the use of Latin Sound as a conveyer of stereotypes to mainstream audiences, and 2, the resituation of Salsa music into the realm of pan-Latino consciousness. As you will see throughout this page, I like to explore topics that are not only of interest to me but also tap into my own personal experiences as an ethnic person at the U of I and in the US. Enjoy!

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#### Inquiry Page Entry #1

##### "Univeristy Documents"

The first University narrative I have chosen to look at is the Illini Union Board's website (<http://www.iuboard.uiuc.edu/>). After navigating this website, and I do admit it is not the first time I have done so, one thing that I find particularly disturbing are the missions of the varying committees under the "Cultural Programs" area (<http://www.iuboard.uiuc.edu/committees/culture.asp>). What draws my attention about this particular section compared to the other mission statements of committees under different areas (Progressive Programs is one example, <http://www.iuboard.uiuc.edu/committees/Progressive.asp>) is that the mission statements are exactly the same. They read, "Provide programming intended to offer both social and educational value. The committee focuses on awareness of (SUBSTITUTE ETHNIC BACKGROUND HERE) issues as they relate to the global community." I guess this leads me to the very simple question, "what is up with that?" If the Illini Union Board is making the legitimate attempts it claims to represent students of color and larger ethnic communities, then why is it contributing to what can be regarding as a homogenizing stereotype that all things ethnic focus on the same things? In all fairness, none of the mission statements for committees are fairly complex, but at the same time, none of them are repeated verbatim.

The Second University narrative I have chosen is that of the Bruce D. Nesbitt African-American Cultural program (<http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/aacp/home/>) (I would have looked at La Casa's website, but in all honesty, it is out of date and appears somewhat prehistoric) to compare the mission statement of the AACP to that of IUB's African American Programs Committee. Obviously, a website as such spends much more time devoted to the program and resource offerings, because that is the website's sole purpose compared to IUB's, whose intent is to simply provide a glance into what the committees mission and intent is. But the mission statement, in my opinion, seems more relevant and

inline with expressed needs of the Black community on campus. It reads, "To serve as a vehicle for self-expression and leadership enhancement to students of African descent through the vehicles of workshops, seminars, and performing groups... To promote campus-wide understanding of the unique contributions of African-Americans to the life and culture of the campus, the nation and indeed the world..." As I pursue interviews, I hope to shed some light as to why there seems to be a void between the purposes conveyed by these separate entities.

## **EXPLORE**

### **Question**

**What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?**

### **Plan**

**How will you go about answering your inquiry?**

Inquiry Page Entry #3

I would like to interview someone who has a strong understanding of the politics and varying struggles of the Latina/o community here on campus. I say this because I am considering exploring the relevance of the Illini Union Board's Cultural Programs committees to the very communities they "claim" to represent. I think my interest in this resonates not only in that I have done substantial work with the IUB and La Casa, but in recent weeks, I've seen the IUB shrug off a huge conflict in that the Latino Graduate Student Conference was held the same day of the Formal. With this in mind I am also interested in exploring the means of communication between the IUB and the departments who represent the Latino academic and social student constituency.

## **OBSERVE**

**What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?**

Inquiry Page Entry #6

"Focus Group Method, Failed Attempt"

Unfortunately, the focus group I hoped to conduct as one of my methods fell through because conflicting schedules. My intent, however, was to meet with past board and committee members who are also known to be fairly active within respective cultural houses and communities. I chose to contact 4 specific students, Oliver Hatchet, ex-area coordinator for Cultural Programs, Crystal Green, current President of the Illini Union Board, Rachel Roman, ex-chair of Latina/o programs, Chinwe Nwazota, ex-chair of African-American cultural programs, because of the level of commitment they exhibited to both entities (IUB and cultural houses). The purpose of the focus group would be to draw upon the experiences of these students and continue to attempt to tease out the relevance of cultural programs along with its position in communities of color. As indicated by my interview with Lance Wright, connections between the IUB and the cultural houses are mostly dependent upon the students themselves, so working through the reasoning of such students would be a key determinant in examining the formation of such relationships.

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Inquiry Page Entry #4  
"Interview and Analysis"

Interview with Lance Wright Conducted March 15th, 2005 at 4:00pm

On March 15th, a couple days before spring break, I decided to interview Lance Wright, who is an Assistant Director in the Illini Union. I know Lance from my days with the Latina/o Programming Committee of the Illini Union Board and thought he would be a good reference to begin sorting out how I would like to structure my research proposal on networks within units in student affairs and crossing over to varying academic units (namely the ethnic-based academic programs, Latino Studies, Afro-Am Studies, etc...). I've decided to not include the entire interview because the last five minutes had more to do with murals in the Union, and the conversation is already fairly long. All in all, I think I am going to conduct a second interview with Hank Walter, who is the director of the Illini Union, and hopefully he will be able to give some additional insights. It's not that I didn't find the interview with Lance useful, but more I'm not exactly sure where this project is going, so it is hard to place my questions in a research context. Hopefully, my meeting with Professor Ablemann will help alleviate my confusion. The actual transcript is uploaded.

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Inquiry Page Entry #2

"How did you end up at the U of I?" - 2/23/05

For the purposes of this exercise, I decided to interview my girlfriend, Rachel, mostly out of convenience, but also because I thought it would be interesting to inquire about her experiences at the university thus far. The interview took place in my living room after the finale of "Project Runway" and the new episode of "The West Wing."

After asking the first question "How did you end up at the U of I?" it was fairly evident that most of her decision was influenced by family. She had to attend an in-state school, the school also had to be a public institution because private school costs were out of range for her parents, and a few of her family members had graduated from the U of I so they had some influence on her appeal to the school. She finished by saying the U of I was the best option for the money she and her family would be paying. She also noted that this happened to be her first choice after visiting several state schools in Illinois, none of which resonated well with her expectations.

From there it was fairly natural to move into a question concerning her expectations of the campus. Rather quickly she jumped into a discussion of her all-girl private high-school. Only 150 girls graduated in her class, so even though she knew she wanted to be here on campus, there was still a fear of the sheer size of the university. "Really scared" is how she described her emotional state after describing some of the initial conversations she had about college with her girlfriends from high school. "Everyone would always be like, oh the U of I is so big, and stuff like that," had her nervous about being on such a large campus, but once she got here she didn't feel she noticed the size.

I do have to say, she made it relatively easy for me to come up with follow up questions, because it was almost as if she was implicitly leading me through the discussion.

From her last statement I asked what made the size of the university unnoticeable. Her response was short, "Gen Eds. I haven't decided a major yet, so all of my classes are in the same quad area."

At that point I wondered a couple of things, 1. How does the scope of the university compare with students who spend most of their time on other parts of campus? and 2. Does her ethnicity have any kind of factor in reducing the size of such a large student body?

Her response to the 2nd question, "Does culture or ethnicity factor into her unnoticeable feeling of size?" was "Maybe, maybe not." She felt her comfort had more to do with close friendships rather than her ethnicity in particular. She continued to note that people of varying ethnic groups have friends, and she's sure they provide a particular sense of comfort on such a large campus.

Her discussion of friendships and campus size brought me back to questions of expectations, so I again asked if there were any other expectations or goals she had from the "college experience" that she could articulate. She expected college to be much harder than high school, and even though she feels her 2nd year here is harder than her first, it is still not exactly what she expected to be in terms of difficulty. She also went on to note that in High School she felt like one of the smarter of the bunch because she always got A's and B's, but not that she was here, she noticed that everyone was pretty smart, so her accomplishments in High School didn't matter so much.

At that point we hit our first awkward moment so I asked, "How has it been for her out here," she replied, "It's been Great!" with a big cheesy/over-exaggerated smile. Once again, however, she led me right into the next portion of our discussion in that she randomly brought up Affirmative Action. She began to explain how her first thoughts of college mostly consisted of competing with "smart white people." In my notes, I quickly jot "compete?" because I am interested in her meaning of compete, because by now she has used it a couple of times, but I never followed up. I didn't want to break the affirmative action flow. She continued that she never realized how ethnicity might play into not only her admission but that of others into college. She remembered that one of her closest friends from high school, who isn't Latina and had "better" grades than her, wasn't accepted to the university and she didn't quite understand why. She then began to notice that people she met on campus didn't quite meet the academic standards of the university, yet they were accepted and questions arose in her head like, "how did these people get here?" However, she was still adamant about not being against affirmative action as she repeated a couple of times: "Everyone deserves a fair shot at higher education. It's not their fault if their high school couldn't afford the best materials, or they themselves couldn't get into private schools. Everyone deserves a fair shot."

Naturally, I brought up the reverse argument, "What about the claims of reverse racism made by opposers of affirmative action?" and she responded, "You mean when white people say it's not fair?" I said, "Yeah, more or less," and she said, "It's just that they don't understand because they are not in those same situations."

She then moved on to say that when she came out here she didn't want to feel like a "minority." This is a statement that possibly ties to the stigma placed on people of color with regards to affirmative action. That is to say, the notion that because affirmative action has benefited us to a certain extent, we are not qualified, worthy, or smart enough to comprehend the intense academic rhetoric the university provides.

From there I asked if she felt her ethnicity has become more salient since she has been on this campus. She said, "I think so." She continued to explain that when she is with her family, they don't need to reaffirm who they are or where they come from because they already know, but on campus is a different story. In her eyes, the number of Latinas/os is so small compared to the greater student body, that it becomes easier to seek out those

who relate and celebrate what is so natural at home. She finished by saying, "Out here, it's different."

That is where our conversation pretty much ended. From there I asked questions about her boyfriend, who is me, and no serious answers were given, we pretty much joked around and then called it quits.

I think I would have preferred a tape recorder in the setting. I tend to be a note jotter, so that means I sometimes get caught up in writing and lose given moments. However, I also tried to be fairly conscientious of this and did an okay job using short hand so I don't particularly feel I missed out any huge moments. If anything I probably followed the dialogue model in Emerson et al, but I probably messed it all up along the way.

## **DISCUSS**

### **Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data**

Inquiry Page Entry #8

#### Final Research Proposal

##### The Problem

The Illini Union Board prides itself on being the University's largest student-run organization on campus. And admittedly, no student organization has a substantial means for comparison. The IUB is a fully funded institution backed by proceeds from the Illini Union Bookstore, student fees, as well as university sponsored fund-raisers. Founded in 1942, the IUB seeks to provide students with a paraprofessional experience that translates relatively easily into the "real" world. And it is this experience that I hope to explore.

As Lance Wright noted in our March interview, any relationship that is to exist between the cultural programs area of the Illini Union Board and the universities ethnic cultural centers are dependent upon student interests. However, such statements lead me to ask if such delicate matters can be as simple as that? Should students eager to participate in the university setting become the sole bearers of the collective burden that is community representation and advancement? If so, than what is the purpose and role of an advisor to a student run organization? And lastly, by adopting a larger cultural programs area, has the Illini Union Board accepted and lived up to the social obligation that is nurtured within the consciousness of student life and activism at the universities cultural centers?

##### Site Selection

Many of the questions I would like to begin asking, along with the bulk of this project, stem a great deal from personal experience with both the Illini Union Board and La Casa Cultural Latina. My experience, thus, helps me build on larger ideological questions concerning student development within both cites and how cultural representation is approached in different university settings. Ultimately, the goal of this project would be to serve as an informational source for students of color interested in the IUB as well as words of encouragement to inspire development of more self-sustaining connections across the very settings that inspire the cultural consciousness within students.

##### Literature Review

Literature surrounding the Illini Union Board is fairly scarce, however, work can be found regarding student leadership and organizational development techniques in various

journals in the field of higher education. Such sources might prove to be useful in discerning advisory methods and preparation as Program Managers in the Illini Union begin to deal with students on a macro scale and students of color on a more micro scale.

This being said, anthropological work concerning the Illini Union Board at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is non-existent. This work, thus, would work to fill a much needed gap in developing anthropological understanding of student development via co-curricular activities.

## Methods

The participant-observation of the daily workings in the Illini Union Board is a key method in understanding the IUB's approach to programming and networking. Additional time would be spent in the various Cultural Houses on campus in order to construct a vision of the "politics" involved in co-sponsorship between the two university units.

Conducting a focus group amongst student board and committee members who are also known to be fairly active within respective cultural houses and communities would allow me to draw upon the experiences of these students and continue to attempt to tease out the relevance of cultural programs along with its position in communities of color. As indicated by my interview with Lance Wright, connections between the IUB and the cultural houses are mostly dependent upon the students themselves, so working through the reasoning of such students would be a key determinant in examining the formation of such relationships.

Additionally, archival research on the Illini Union Board, La Casa Cultural Latina, and the African-American Cultural Program could allow for a historical analysis of co-sponsorships, networking attempts, and also mentalities behind the relationships of such work.

## Ethical Challenges

The greatest ethical challenge I will face is attempting to objectively discern between anthropological findings and personal narrative/experiences. Aside from this, if interviewees decide to remain confidential, then I will use alternative names and not make reference to the positions they held or the years they did so. However, race is an important distinction to make in this type of study in that understanding the differences in perceptions and mentalities of students of color and white students is vital to positioning networking relationships amongst the cultural houses and the Illini Union Board.

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## Inquiry Page Entry #7

I first might start off by saying I think I may have bit off a little more than I can chew with a project analyzing the Illini Union Board (IUB) and its highly complex relationships with communities of color on campus, more specifically our ethnic cultural centers. This is not the type of project I would recommend a graduating senior to take on, one, because of the tremendous number of routes one can take and two, there is an immense amount of questions to be both asked and answered. Quite simply, one semester is not enough time.

The Illini Union Board prides itself on being the University's largest student-run organization on campus. And admittedly, no student organization has a substantial means

for comparison. The IUB is a fully funded institution backed by proceeds from the Illini Union Bookstore, student fees, as well as university sponsored fund-raisers. The offices are located on the second floor of the Illini Union, which exposes any student working with the IUB to a multitude of resources including a full staff of program advisors. Founded in 1942, the IUB seeks to provide students with a paraprofessional experience that translates relatively easily into the “real” world. And it is this experience that I hope to explore.

Without completely dismantling the Anthropological code of ethics, I should make the disclaimer, that much of my fieldwork has been conducted over the last 3-4 years through my own paraprofessional growth and experiences here at the University, and my fieldnotes actually consist of memories rather than actual documents. It is within my own personal narrative where the link between my first interview with Lance Wright, some of my brief archival research, as well as some potential research ideas makes this work an interesting juxtaposition between ethnography and personal narrative.

As Lance Wright noted in our March interview, any relationship that is to exist between the cultural programs area of the Illini Union Board and the universities ethnic cultural centers are dependent upon student interests. However, such statements lead me to ask if such delicate matters can be as simple as that? Should students eager to participate in the university setting become the sole bearers of the collective burden that is community representation and advancement? If so, than what is the purpose and role of an advisor to a student run organization? And lastly, by adopting a larger cultural programs area, has the Illini Union Board accepted and lived up to the social obligation that is nurtured within the consciousness of student life and activism at the universities cultural centers?

In searching through the Illini Union Board archives at the University Archives, I hoped to find some additional information that included any sort racial conversations. Though the minutes did not necessarily reflect the type of information I would use for a project of such nature, I did come across a videotaped debate on affirmative action sponsored by the Illini Union Board in 1996 between Linda Chavez and Clarence Page. To briefly reflect on the history of this event, when I came to chair Latina/o programs for the IUB in Spring '02, I was still in charge of peer mentoring at La Casa Cultural Latina, and I distinctly remember conversations I had concerning situations as follows. The program itself was very poorly received by the Latino community and for a number of years created a substantial rift between Latinos and the IUB. The main contention of the Latina/o community at the time was the IUB was sponsoring a Latina keynote without consulting La Casa or Latino students on the matter. Linda Chavez is considered a highly controversial figure that stands avidly against affirmative action and was brought down to represent an ethnic community that greatly disagrees with her (atleast on this campus at that time). More recently (Fall '04), the IUB brought down Richard Rodriguez, another controversial Latino figure. This time, Latina/o studies and La Casa were involved in a brief protest against his presence on campus. Again, the presumption is that when the Illini Union Board brings down controversial keynotes, the event is a surprise to the larger Latino student community, and this creates a sentiment that the IUB is not interested in the needs of Latino students, but rather their white counterparts. This is an idea I hope to explore with further interviews amongst students involved in the IUB and Latino community on campus.

Many of the questions I would like to begin asking, along with the bulk of this project, stem more from personal experience than actual research interest. However, as my time here comes to an end, I would hope that a project of this kind could serve as an informational source for students of color interested in the IUB as well as words of encouragement to inspire development of connections across different university settings.

## **REFLECT**

### **Link**

#### **Connect with other resources and materials.**

Here are the websites that have informed parts of this project:

Illini Union Board, Cultural Programs Committee:

<http://www.iuboard.uiuc.edu/committees/culture.asp>

La Casa Cultural Latina:

<http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/lacasa/>

Bruce D. Nesbitt African-American Cultural Program:

<http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/aacp/home/default.asp>

University Archival Information:

<http://web.library.uiuc.edu/ahx/uaccard/UAControlCard.asp?RG=37&SG=7&RS=3&highlight=illini%20union%20board>

<http://web.library.uiuc.edu/ahx/uasfa/3707003.pdf>

Daily Illini Web Article, Racism in the IUB?:

<http://www.dailyillini.com/media/paper736/news/2005/04/01/News/Actions.United.Fights.For.Diversity-909870.shtml>

Teresa's discussion on the "racial spaces" fits very well with my discussion of IUB and its cultural links:

[http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/unit\\_update.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13960.xml](http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/unit_update.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13960.xml)

Per Teresa's advice I tried looking up Jillian Beaz's site, unfortunately it is unavailable for some reason. If at some point it comes back up, try searching for her page titled: "Ethnic studies at U of I?"

Herb Jones is researching the importance and meaning behind having cultural houses on campus:

[http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update\\_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13895.xml](http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u13895.xml)

#### **Uploaded Files:**

[LanceInterview.doc](#)

[Inquiry#4.doc](#)

[ResearchProposal.doc](#)

## **OTHER**

#### **A space for other notes, findings, comments, etc.**

1. Probably the most important recommendation I could make would be that Illini Union Boards Cultural Programs committee should make great efforts to collaborate with both the ethnic cultural houses and ethnic academic units. Both of these entities, the academic

and the social, are of huge value and play a great role in the development of cultural consciousness.

2. Suitable working relationships should be sustained between the staffs of these units regardless of the students personal interests. For example, over the years the types of programs developed by student chairs in Latina/o Programs has drastically ranged from big budget plays, to guest lectures, to dance-a-thons, to cultural tastes. The one thing that these events have in common is their undeniable Latino specificity, and for events as such to happen separately from La Casa, which is meant to exist as the embodiment of Latino cultural pride and struggle, is fairly separatist with respect to campus units. Student affairs advisors should thus promote fluidity between their unit borders.