About the Author: I am a senior in anthropology and classical civilization. More importantly, I am someone who has struggled with my ethnic identity for quite some time. My father is Colombian, born and raised there, and he moved to the States when he was 21; my mother is German American and her family had lived for generations in Maryland. Most of my family is on my Colombian side - all my cousins are from my father's side. Yet I am very white and don't fit the stereotypes of being Latino/a - thus, in other people's views, I "take advantage" of where my father is from, and have been told that straight to my face in the past. Thus while I was always curious about La Casa, I had my own personal issues that prevented me from going there, until this year. I am very happy I did, however, because I would otherwise be in the dark about many of the issues Latinos/as face here on campus, and my assumptions of being unwelcomed by the Latino/a community would never have been challenged. I am going to continue my research next semester, and hope to be an asset to this new program as well.

Keywords: La Casa Cultural Latina, minority retention, Latino/a, identity, race, ethnicity

Abstract: My research aims to find the answers to three questions: who is La Casa for, what is the popular understanding of La Casa's function, and how does that affect the success of this new retention program? Past research by Ethnography of the University Students has suggested that the popular understanding of La Casa is not to improve personal performance in academic arenas, and how some people might feel excluded by La Casa and the larger Latino/a population on campus (Files, 2006; Garcia, 2006). I also found these mentioned by interviewees in my own research. The I-achieve program, being instituted by a group of new workers, hopes to increase Latino/a students' social networks on campus and off, and bring about self-improvement through goal setting and assessment workshops. This program, however, has had limited response, especially compared to the approximately 2,000 Latino/a students enrolled at the U of I. I intend to investigate why through participant observation, interviewing, and surveying, testing my hypotheses along the way.
Initial Exercises:

Reading Response

Initial Exercises:

Observation

Initial Exercises:

Analysis of a Text

Initial Exercises: This interview is relevant to my research as he talks about his Latino self-identification and his experiences with La Casa as well.

A Practice Interview

Conducting my first interview for research purposes was nerve-racking, to say the least. Though I was comforted by the fact that I knew the person I was interviewing, that he was not a perfect stranger, it was my first formal interview, ever. However, looking back on it now, I think interviewing someone I was acquainted with previously could have been detrimental, in some ways, to the interview. I failed miserably by Weiss’s standards, who discourages what he calls “intrusion,” or talking about yourself. The first 10 minutes of my “interview” were actually me talking about my background, about school worries, etc., to the point that I had to consciously tell myself to stop and ask him a question or two! I opened with “so how did you get to the U of I?,” found him a little overwhelmed by this fairly broad question, and restarted with “where did you grow up?” From there the interview went fairly smoothly. My interviewee was born and raised in Wicker Park, Chicago, with two brothers and one sister. When he said he was from Wicker Park, he said he always prefaced it with an explanation – that when he was growing up there, it was “bad, dangerous,” a neighborhood with mostly ethnic grocery stores and where drive-by shootings occurred. Today, he said, it was a place where upper- or middle-class young white people live, a place he said was like “Sex and the City.” What epitomized, for me, the part of the interview in which he was talking about his schooling was this: “I was never Mexican enough for the Mexican kids, but too ‘ethnic’ for the white kids.” This struggle is apparent even in the various schools he attended, for while he started in the public inner-city school, he went to a private school for gifted students for a while, and then went back to the public school. He said that many of his classmates in public school wanted to “prove their masculinity through gangs,” which was not him. However, as his previous quote demonstrated, he did not quite fit
in at the private school either. One of the only Latino students there, with upper- to middle-class white Americans, he was too “ethnic,” and still felt like an outsider. He enjoyed reading, singing, and playing the piano even at a young age. He even wondered if he had grown up in a more “accepting environment;” as he said, could he have been at Harvard? Harvard, to him, was the “epitome” of schools, though he himself wanted to go to UCLA. His counselor at the public school, though, strongly discouraged it, saying “You might get in to UIC with luck.” This was how he ended up at the U of I Urbana-Champaign. He said, “I knew I’d get in here, and it is a decent institution.” Though not his first choice, he has come to appreciate some aspects of the U of I. He said that when he first came here, he had this feeling of invincibility, that he could go anywhere, do anything; and that he is now much more socially-conscious. However, he expressed a “bitterness” concerning fraternity and sorority members here. As the University with the biggest Greek system in the US, he said he had somewhat of an inferiority complex in terms of economic accessibility – they had so much money that they could spend freely, but he could not. I did not want to probe further when he mentioned this, as it is a touchy subject, so to speak. I felt the boundaries of researching and being a friend or someone to talk to had been skirted. Indeed, the interviewee said afterwards that he enjoyed talking to me, that it was “therapeutic.” Overall, I have many more questions and now and many mistakes throughout the interview that I would like to fix. I know I asked leading questions that might have been insensitive, as I do not know this person very well. For example, I asked “did your brothers or sister influence you at all in making a decision of where to go?” I also asked how his father had died, adding at the end “if you’re comfortable telling me.” It was reflex question that I feel was too probing and unrelated to what the interview was about. Towards the end, the interview became much more conversational, me telling him stories and about my own feelings coming to this University. However, in my mind at least, the formal interview was over. When does the interview stop and the conversation begin? That was hard to distinguish, for me. Hopefully the lessons I learned from this first interview will help me in my future research.

**Question:** Third question: Why is the academic programming at La Casa changing now, and what are the ideologies behind these changes? How does this program, and the people who subscribe in it and help install it, reflect broader issues of inclusion/exclusion and Latino/a identity on campus? How does the ideology of retention fit in to all of this? Revised question: How does Latino/a cultural programming affect students’
perceptions of their academic success and university retention rates? The Office of the Dean of Students was formed, though under a different name and with different responsibilities, in 1901. On the other hand, La Casa Cultural Latina was not founded until 1974, after a series of protests and lobbying. The Latino/a community at the time of the formation of La Casa would, then, seem to be pretty united in a common goal of having cultural programming and a physical house on campus for themselves. However, the Latino/a community today seems to be in a quite different state. Research done by previous students in ANTH 411 have exposed the discrimination some Latino/a students feel towards other Latino/a students, and how ineffective at times the cultural programming here is in accomplishing their mission of “promoting a diverse and welcoming environment that supports full inclusion for all members of the university community” (from the La Casa website). The other part of the mission statement that interests me is that La Casa “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 Latino/a students.” Thus my specific question is does University cultural programming divide or unify the Latino/a community at the U of I, and how does it affect individual Latino/a retention and graduation? I chose the second part of my question on the basis that out of all the other mission statements of all the different cultural programs, the La Casa one is the only one that specifically mentions retention and graduation. This makes me wonder if it is a specific problem for Latinos/as on campus, or if it is a general problem for minorities on campus.

**Plan:**

I will continue observing I-achieve meetings, both those of only staff and those with other Latino/a students. I will interview two people (I have their names) who came to the first meeting of the goal assessment part of I-achieve but have not attended since. I will interview the two people who I have not already involved in implementing I-achieve. I think this is all I can do before semester end. Revised: I will be observing a specific academic program coordinated by La Casa employees for Latino/a students, aimed to increase the retention rates of the Latino/a population on campus and help them in the future. Firstly, I have to research the history of Latino/a cultural programming by the Office of the Dean of Students in the archives. I would also have to research the efficacy of other cultural programming here by talking to directors and students who are a part of the Asian American House, the Bruce D. Nesbitt African-American House etc. I would also conduct interviews with Latino students, both those who go
to La Casa and those who do not. The hard part would be finding former U of I Latino students who transferred from or dropped out of the U of I, but hopefully Latino students here could tell me of friends of theirs, perhaps, who left U of I and would be willing to talk to me. Thus phone calls, online conversations, or emails with specific questions would be a part of my research project. I would also have to interview the Dean of Students to get his opinion on minority affairs and cultural programming. Finally, I would need to look at the statistics of how many minority students have been accepted in the past, and how many are retained and graduate on average. Comparison with studies at other schools will also be a part of the process.

**Data:** My interview was very enlightening, considering it was not at all what I was expecting from an interview of a La Casa worker. I consciously chose a La Casa worker as my interviewee as it would provide a new perspective compared to the other interview I conducted, in which my person talked about the exclusion he felt by La Casa and the people who go there. Imagine my surprise when Luisa, the girl I interviewed, had a very similar experience and perception of La Casa the first two years she was here! But let me start from the beginning. My first question was where she grew up (I find it a very useful ice-breaking opening question), and she told me she moved from Guatemala at the age of twelve to Chicago. She found it overwhelming, especially since she did not know much English and she was encountering a completely different educational system – in Guatemala they do not have a “high school,” so to speak. Schooling goes from 1st through 6th grade and then 7th through 12th. Despite all these challenges, she ended up getting admitted into a private, all-girl Catholic school. Luisa is a very expressive and enthusiastic person, and did not agree with certain aspects of her schooling. She explained how the perceptions of American high schools in Guatemala came from shows like “Saved by the Bell,” and that when she came she was looking forward to the football games, homecoming dances, among other things. However, what she found was the “institutionalized guilt,” as she put it, and how there was no “diversity of thought.” I find it interesting that she used these words even early on in the interview – it is obviously something she highly values. One of the reasons she was turned off by La Casa was the “self-segregation,” as she put it, of this house. Though she now realizes the importance of having a space for Latinos on campus to feel “safe,” she stated “you never see any African-Americans or white people coming in here.” Ultimately, she hoped that by working at La Casa she could create a more inclusive environment, by “being the change you
wish to see,” as she put it. In a way, one can see the issues she had with her private Catholic school are the same issues she had/has with La Casa. She hoped to create an “inclusive environment,” with diverse people feeling welcome to come in to La Casa; and despite all the programs for Latina students and sororities trying to recruit her through La Casa, she made the choice to work at La Casa based on her own personal philosophy – “be the change you wish to see.” Through these examples we can see the importance Luisa puts on inclusiveness and diversity. Though these two words may seem opposite, for her it is the same: one needs an inclusive atmosphere to accept a diversity of people, something she holds as important when she complained that there was no diversity of thought in her high school. Her high school, however, was not the only influence for her to join La Casa as a worker. Much of the interview was occupied by Luisa’s description of a retention program she entered in high school, called “Explorers.” A highly competitive program used, according to Luisa, to “diversify the workforce,” this program accepts 60-70 students a year out of a pool of 1500 students, all of whom need to be nominated to even apply. Luisa described the application process as “cutthroat,” one in which you have to come back for multiple interviews and really have to stand out to get a callback. Also, the goal of the program is to get those minority students who were “missed,” as she put it, by other scholarships. Thus, a student cannot apply if he/she has any other scholarship. Luisa then gave herself as an example, as though her GPA was weighted due to International Baccaleureate classes she had taken (like AP, but all papers and exams are graded by multiple international teachers), she “only” had a 3.3 overall. I put “only” in quotations to show that it is not me judging her GPA, but her judging herself – she shrugged and waved her hands in a “so-so” motion to show me that she was not pleased with her GPA from high school. However, she states, she got a 33 on her ACT and was very involved in clubs – she swam, played basketball and softball, and started an environmental club. Thus, though she may not have had the best grades by other scholarships’ standards, “Explorers” picked her out to be someone who would “shine” in one of the schools in this program. The uniqueness of this program is apparent as it not only provides important academic advising, but a “family” away from home. The way the program works is that of the 70 that are accepted, they are divided into groups of 10, each group going to a different school in the Midwest. One of these schools is University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Thus, Luisa had nine other people that she got to know even before they arrived on campus. She states “I knew about the Career Center, tutoring opportunities, and issues
surrounding the Chief before I even got here.” Once on campus, she was required to meet with her nine fellow “explorers” once a week for the first two years, and the other 30 students from the other years (freshmen, sophomores etc.) twice a month. She said “they’re my family here,” and that they were supposed to help each other graduate, provide support for all the other members, and “make an impact.” One of the ways Luisa has tried to make an impact is through her work at La Casa, and the development of an academic program that hopes to help other Latino/a students be retained, so to speak. Luisa is one of the coordinators for a program called “I-achieve.” Though this retention program was created a couple of years ago, this is the first year La Casa is really trying to get people involved in it. Before, La Casa had a mentoring program that was based primarily on matching students in a certain class with students in a higher class; this has been revamped to match people based on their goals and skills, not just on class. The program is designed to increase people’s “navigational capital,” meaning theirs is not the mainstream culture here, so how do you navigate in this historically white university, and their “social capital,” or their ability to network and have connections that can benefit them while in school and also in pursuing their careers. This is just background information on this new retention program; I was familiar with it before I went into my interview, and thus asked Luisa questions based on her own experience in another highly successful retention program, and how she felt the program has been received and will be received. The problems Luisa identified about the program were not in the set-up of the program – “it’s a successful program, just not a successful turn-out” – but in the nature of the program and the people the program is aimed for. She said that about 9 people came for the first session, and I observed myself that no one came for the second meeting. One of the major problems in her mind is La Casa’s reputation in the Latino/a community. She explains that La Casa is seen as a “place for comfort, to learn about culture, the Mecca of cultural knowledge,” but she emphasizes that it “should impact them academically.” She says these people are “not always from the best schools,” and that “studies should be important, not just cultural support” – “you need to work.” This might give a wrong impression of Luisa- she understands the cultural support that is needed by Latino/a students on campus (she earlier said that the “Tacos and Tequila” party was a turning point for her in her realization of why La Casa was needed), but that retention is an issue that needs to be addressed as well. Right now, La Casa is only seen in that capacity, as a “home away from home,” and thus the receptivity of academic programs is much less than
those sponsored by La Casa like dances and ice cream socials. It is in this sense that she describes the program as “romantic and idealized,” because you “got to make them do out,” which she does not have the power to do. She expresses frustration and disappointment – “we’re bringing resources to you,” with emphasis on “to you” as in disbelief, and “I’m going to cry” when I told her no one came to the second meeting. I found this to be a contradiction in terms, as she herself states that the program is “romantic and idealized,” but then disbelief and shock when no one comes. Ultimately I believe it is her own background that causes this confusion – as a person who actively pursued a retention program that in many ways mirrors this new retention program, it is hard for her to know why more people would not attend. She even says at one point that she doesn’t know why it is not more popular. She believes it to be “successful” and that, at least in the first meeting, the META workers were prepared and “working well.” She acknowledges though that it is “really hard getting the word out.” I also proffer the explanation that it was scheduled during midterm week, which I maybe should not have done, but I found it a valid explanation and wanted to make her feel better about it. She had obviously been working hard on this program, and as I was the one to break the news to her that no one came, I felt it necessary to offer some sympathy. She agreed though that it could have been just the timing. From my perspective, this interview completely confused my previous expectations about La Casa and the people who work/go there. I talked to my previous interviewee about La Casa and his feelings about it, as I knew that my project would be focused around it. He said that he thought La Casa to be “cliqueish,” and the people there to be “very angry people.” The first word that popped into Luisa’s head about her first impression of La Casa was also that it was “cliqueish.” She also believes that the people there “defined Latino/a by political activeness,” hostile to other Latino/as who were not politically active. However, she is a worker in La Casa, developing a program for it. I am interested to see where this sentiment of La Casa being “cliqueish” and filled with “very angry people” comes from, as I have not yet encountered it, not in my conversations with the Assistant Director, nor with Luisa, nor even with another worker there who was very welcoming to me when I arrived early for my interview with Luisa, having no idea who I was or why I was there. Luisa believes that La Casa and the students who go there needed change, from her own experience with it since freshman year. I am looking forward to seeing where these perceptions arise from, and how these perceptions, if at all, impact the reception of the academic programs La Casa offers.
The Archive

I knew since last month that my research project would eventually lead me to the archives La Casa has. It is crucial for me to understand the development of the academic programs since La Casa’s inception to understand how this new program differs from older programs, and how effective those programs were compared to now. It was also interesting to look through the correspondence that was going on when La Casa was formed. For example, the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs said this new house could not be referred to as a center because all “centers” had to be approved by the Board of Trustees, but calling it a “cultural house” would allow them to bypass the Board’s approval. To see this hesitation on the part of the University to even have this cultural house, and the way the University is perceived today as being apathetic to Latinos/as needs, shows a continuity that I would otherwise not know of. I conducted an interview with the program director of I-achieve, and will use some of the archive information I gathered to analyze that interview. I went last Monday to La Casa hoping to observe an I-achieve program in action. When I arrived the room generally used for these meetings was dark and empty. I proceeded up the steps to see if the program director was there, and came upon a La Casa staff meeting in progress. The program director invited me in, and as the meeting adjourned I approached her asking what was going on in terms of META. This led to an almost two-hour interview in which we discussed many of the issues facing Latino/a students today, from retention issues, to University of Illinois issues, to La Casa issues. Let’s just say I was very grateful to have a consent form on me, but I did not have my tape recorder with me as the director had said before the personal nature of these goals and assessment meetings, and requested that I tell everyone why I was there – thus I thought it inappropriate to bring a recorder. Any interviews I would conduct would be outside these meetings. Thus, much of the interview I have below are recollections and whatever I have in my notes, which I scribbled furiously while talking to the Director. We talked a lot about my project as well – who to contact, what to read, etc. Those parts I will exclude in my analysis as they pertain only to me. I asked the Director how I-achieve was going, as one of the main features of I-achieve is that it is supposed to be continuous. Students are supposed to assess how they are achieving their goals, what steps to take next, and other such activities to ensure that they achieve those goals by semester end. As I witnessed, no one had come to the second meeting, nor a third which I was not aware of. Thus the people working with the program, three La Casa workers and her, were going to meet this Monday to discuss what they could realistically do by the end of the
semester (which was coming up) with this program. However, other parts of the program were successful or at least promised success – she had said before how the lunch series they were installing to provide, as the pamphlet stated, “access to resources, development of college life skills, health and wellness, and community connections,” was one of the parts of the program she saw as being popular. The problem is the goal-setting workshops. About nine people came to the first meeting, but since then no one has come. Why? Jessica and I discussed some of these issues. One of the main reasons she proffered was that at specifically University of Illinois, a cultural house having an academic program was an “uneasy fit.” This theme has come up in several other discussions, from my previous interview with Luisa and with Jessica at least twice. Ultimately, La Casa is trying to effect a change in perception of La Casa from a “home,” or a place that “fetishizes cultural difference,” as Jessica said, to a place where academic work can be achieved. She believes that the cultural houses here are being pushed to do exactly that, and gave the example of the “taste of Nevada Street” replacing the traditional three-day orientation program ended in 2004. She expressed frustration, as the “taste of Nevada street” is really geared towards non-Latino/a students to come to appreciate Latino/a culture through food. However, the people “La Casa” is supposed to help, are not reached by this event. Ultimately, the three-day orientation program forced Latino/a students to come to La Casa and be introduced to the various programs it offered. I myself remember going through this three-day orientation program, in which I remember debating to sign up for the mentoring program mentioned on the tour, afraid of the toughness of the classes offered here. This leads to a discussion of the various programs for minority students who first come to the U of I, an experience I myself went through. The Presidential Award Program, whose records I reviewed while at the Archives, was made as a way to recruit and retain minority students here. According to Jessica, this program stemmed from the President telling a bunch of high school minority students that they were accepted to the University then and there, in an “epiphany” moment, and his advisors frantically coming up with a program to put into action the President’s promise. From the archive I viewed, which detailed how one could become a part of this program (minimal ACT scores, recommendation from high school counselor, how one had to consistently identify as a minority), I also learned that this program was installed in response to all of the Illinois State Scholars and other high-achieving minority students attending out-of-state schools (like Michigan) instead of Illinois state schools. The President’s award program thus offered
financial incentive to go to Illinois. I did not know the purpose of this scholarship, of which I am a recipient, until about two weeks ago, and told Jessica this. When a graduate counselor called the second week I came here telling me I had to attend weekly meetings with her to see how I was doing in school, I regarded it as an insult frankly. I thought I was merely being singled out as someone likely to have trouble with school merely because I had identified myself as “Hispanic.” Telling Jessica this, she was not shocked, saying “this university cannot have honest conversations.” She explains that affirmative action programs are not made transparent here, in a matter-of-fact way. Back to the problems facing academic programs at La Casa, she explains that there is a need for group identity of Latinos/as here at the university, almost becoming nostalgic for past programs. She explains that the peer mentoring program was completely student-started, and that the Latino community was much smaller back then and thus closer. She wants to take the retention program that Luisa, a worker on the I-achieve program, talked about in my previous interview (“Explorers”), and put it on a larger scale. She furthers that that is a major reason Luisa is working on this academic program, because of her experience with and expressed love of “Explorers.” Thus, the problem facing Latinos/as on campus in many ways is the fact that it is not a close-knit community, as Jessica said. At the meeting I walked in on, a worker was expressing regret that he had not attended any of the Brazilian organizations on campus’ events. On the Facebook page of I-achieve, a comment was made by someone along these lines: “please, please, please, try to share pictures that not only show people with (greek) letters or (greek) signs...(we often use the scrapbook for recruitment and we want to show unity in the Latino community on campus)” – this post was made on the I-achieve page but is about a scrapbook being created for La Carta, the Latino/a publication. These conversations and my finding of I-achieve’s facebook page, another archive of sorts, have piqued my curiosity. Though the page does not say when it was started, the first wall post was on September 12th, 2006, stating “Ok, do not forget to turn in your applications! Very important!” I found this interesting as I was not aware that there was an application process for I-achieve – when I first went to La Casa to hear about this program, she had said there was an interest list of 50 people. However, she was telling this in front of a journalist for the DI as well writing a piece about I-achieve – she might not have wanted the “application” to be misconstrued? I have no idea, I will have to ask her, as I found this group just recently. Other posts include one from a Latino Greek organization, two posts from La Carta (one included
above) and an advertisement for “Lost in Translation,” a bilingualism workshop at La Casa. These posts show the contested space of Latino/a academic programs. Though the group is clearly only for the specific academic program, you have posts from La Carta, from other programs at La Casa, from a Greek organization stating itself as the “LARGEST LATINA-BASED MULTICULTURAL sorority in the NATION!” The one photo on the page is the flyer for Racism, Power and Privilege from last year. Why is no one coming to I-achieve, yet this group has 54 people in it? Why is no one responding to e-mails, even as simple as “Hi, how are you” from I-achieve organizers? This last fact was gleaned from a I-achieve organizers meeting I attended yesterday which I will post soon but had to do Jessica’s interview and archive research first. The reasons offered by La Casa workers seem myriad, everything from midterm craziness, to lack of a group identity, to the perception of La Casa as a “home” or cultural center, not a site for retention programs to occur. I hope that these reasons become clearer over this semester and next, but I have a feeling they will not.

Data: I was invited to observe a staff meeting for I-achieve by the program director, and I observed first-hand the frustration these workers are experiencing trying to install this program. I came in with two workers and the director already there, waiting for a third worker to arrive. Before the meeting commenced, Jessica followed-up on our last interview, saying one of the problems with I-achieve is that a lot of these programs are thought to be only for freshmen, so students in sophomore year or above do not feel like they can take advantage of these programs. After the third staffer came in, the meeting commenced. Jessica recapped on how at the last two goal-setting workshops no one showed up, and what they could realistically do by the end of the semester for the goal-assessment part of I-achieve. They want to do a sub-assessment program on November 14th, to which a worker replied, “If we like, hold them by the hand, I think they’ll do it.” This got into a discussion with comments like “no one is replying to e-mails, not even ‘hello, how are you doing.’” One emphasized that “man, they are not going to survive. Email is life now.” Many of the workers are becoming disillusioned by the non-responsiveness of people showing interest in these workshops. Jessica had mentioned before that consistently on surveys Latino/a students had expressed a desire for goal-setting workshops, yet workers are puzzled by why there is such a low attendance, and why, even when they work to set them up with distance mentors, still no one responds. One worker explained that maybe one of the reasons people are not coming is that they
want “instant satisfaction,” perhaps explaining why in the past general education workshops have been so successful compared to these goal-setting meetings. At the end of the general education workshop, people will have offered advice on good/bad general education classes they have taken, and hopefully will have chosen a few that they can register for next semester. The goal-setting workshops and following through stretch throughout the semester, making it a long-term commitment for students. It is difficult for students to commit to twice-a-month meetings, especially during midterm time. The meeting also discussed office hours for the I-achieve workers, and how they should e-mail all the people from I-achieve asking if there is any particular class they are having trouble with, as options for dropping a class have passed. The only option, briefly discussed in the meeting, was withdrawal – but one can only withdraw a certain amount of times before the university does not allow it any more, plus it looks pretty bad on a transcript. Staffers also wanted to “ask people what they want for the last month, because it’s the last month,” in hopes of getting some feedback and hopefully helping people finish up the semester. They talked about launching a new campaign next semester, talking about the new wireless set-up of La Casa. Sure enough, when I walked in to La Casa a big poster was taped to the door telling about the wireless capabilities now of La Casa. The program director expressed hope that now the rooms would be more used during the day, stating “people don’t like coming here during the day.” She also stated that “things we need to build next semester are incentives [for people to come], but with no money.” The University has not been doing that well financially, and a lot of the funds allotted to La Casa go to their other programming, leaving not much incentive for students to come to goal-assessment meetings, as what do they materially get out of it? The people that I have interviewed working on this project have continually expressed disbelief at the unresponsiveness of those who signed up and even attended I-achieve meetings at the beginning of the semester. I believe it also has something to do with their own experience and backgrounds as very successful high school students who pursued opportunities, such as Luisa pursuing the “Explorers program,” or an interview I just had with a worker who graduated high school in three years, taking classes by mail, only deciding he wanted to leave early his junior year and accomplishing it in a year. They have worked hard to create smooth-flowing workshops, and be resources to fellow Latino/a students, as far as sending emails to them just asking how they are doing and if they need any help. When I have asked them why they think no one is coming, the responses range from a simple “I don’t know”
and shaking of the head, to answers like Jessica offered at the beginning of the meeting, problems university-wide, to the perception of La Casa, a cultural house, not being a good mix with academic programming (often programs like the graduate counselor program freshman year are offered by the office of student minority affairs). I hope to conduct a focus group with the people signed up on facebook for the I-achieve program, try to figure out what’s going on here from their perspective. I also hope to attend the general education workshop tomorrow, which is usually successful, to find potential respondents.

**Data:** My video would consist of different Latino/a people answering the question: "what is the main purpose of La Casa?" probably eliciting different responses; this I would ask both La Casa workers and other students. I would also ask non-La Casa workers if they saw retention as a problem for Latino/a students. I would ask them to explain why or why not. I would explain how La Casa is instituting a new program aimed to retain Latino/a students at all undergraduate levels, with a limited response. I would end with, "if they do not recognize the problem, how can steps be taken to a solution?"

**Video/Plan**

**Discuss:** Retention of minority students here at the University of Illinois has always been a struggle. Though the U of I has one of the highest retention rates in the Big Ten, it is “not good enough,” in the words of the program director of the I-achieve program being instituted in La Casa. The Latino/a population consistently stays around six to seven percent of the total undergraduate population, yet only about two-thirds of them will actually graduate. Concern over these people leaving school spawned the new program called I-achieve, with the express goal being “to aid in retention and academic success in the Latino/a community through an increase in navigational and social capital.” Navigational and social capital soon became clearer to me when Jessica, the program director, gave me an article that she described as helping her thinking in developing this new program. Rather than being based on Bourdieu’s social capital theory, it is in fact a critique on it. To say that minorities “lack” certain forms of capital that they must acquire to be successful in larger society is insulting and does not take into account the capital that minorities in particular develop that help them survive. Thus, navigational capital is, according to this article, “skills of maneuvering through social institutions…historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in Mind” (Yasso 80). Social capital is “networks of people and community resources” (Yasso 79). According to this article, these forms of capital are specific to
minorities, especially the navigational capital. However, in terms of this University, there are Latinos/as who are proverbially slipping through the cracks – not accessing the many resources U of I and La Casa offers to get them to graduation. Thus I-achieve tries to do that for them through four different methods. The first is a Thursday noon-lunch series that spans talks from health and wellness to tips on applying to graduate school, providing resources along with food and drink. The second part is the goal setting and assessment meetings, in which students identify what they want and meet once every two weeks to discuss how they are attaining their goals. The third part is networking, both through the larger Latino/a community in distance mentoring and here on campus by hosting lunches with members of Latino/a Studies Program and departmental advisors. While unfortunately I was not aware of the first goal-setting and assessment meeting, I was told that approximately ten people came and that it went pretty well. However the next two meetings were unattended, resulting in a change of focus for this new program. I have interviewed all the primary workers on this program and have felt their frustration as well. They worked very hard in creating these programs, making sure they were smoothly run and truly wanting to help students achieve their goals and stay in school, and just do not understand why people do not come. Luisa had not attended the second goal-assessment meeting so when I told her no one came she responded “I think Im going to cry” and then said “were bringing resources to you” in a disbelieving voice. Julio also explained that he had suggested the program to his friends who were struggling academically in school, and when I asked why he thinks no one came to the meetings responded “I don’t even know.” Dolores explained, after a relatively well-attended general education workshop, that it is a new group every time, no familiar faces. I believe it is also hard for these workers to understand why the larger Latino/a community here does not access the resources they are offering when they themselves have accessed resources continually in the past to get to where they are. Luisa is a member of a national retention program called Explorers that aims to diversify the workforce – she went through a rigorous process to be chosen as one of 10 people to gain a scholarship that pays for their entire schooling with conditions that they meet regularly during the first two years at school to make sure they are doing ok, among other aspects. Julio finished high school in three years, doing classes through the mail, and even at one point going above a persons head and talking to a dean to get into an honors class, when that person had said his grades weren’t good enough to be in honors. Dolores in high school was
involved in many extracurricular activities and here is an office
holder in a Latino/a fraternity. They are good at networking, at
accessing resources, and are all very personable. They could be
invaluable assets to other Latino/a students here if only they
knew what La Casa offers. The successful General Education
workshop showed that – the workers told them what exactly they
had to do to graduate, TAs to avoid and/or try to get for certain
classes, tutoring that the Counseling Center offers. Yet only
twelve people came, almost all freshmen, of the 514 Latino/a
students who entered this year. La Casa’s perception, University
environment, and University practices all contribute to the
problems in implementing this otherwise well-thought-out and
beneficial program. Luisa touched on some of these issues
during my interview. As a freshman, she came to a few La Casa
events and was thrown off by sororities trying to recruit her, even
trying to making her feel guilty for not joining. She started working
at La Casa so she could “be the change you wish to see.” La
Casa through its very name suggests a home away from home, a
place for comfort – not a place to be challenged academically, to
judge yourself on your strengths and weaknesses and then have
others judge you on the same criteria (part of goal assessment
part of I-achieve). La Casa is very much a contested space, in
terms of who belongs there and what its true purpose is. From
the program director and two of the workers, they elaborated
three different purposes – one, a place for outside organizations
to meet and recruit; another, to fetishize culture for non-Latino
students through programs like the Taste of Nevada Street,
created to replace the discontinuation of the tours of the cultural
houses during orientation for minority students; another, to
provide protection in a hostile university environment with
students having parties like Tacos and Tequila. In a conversation
I overheard, a worker was expressing frustration after spending
much time organizing a discussion called “Shades of Brown” that
the African-American house and the people there were upset that
they had not been consulted in the making of the workshop. Julio
said in his interview, when I asked why he thinks people did not
attend the last two meetings of the goal assessment workshop, “I
would hope that they [people] feel welcome [here]. I wonder how
it was back in the day.” After interviewing the workers and the
program director, plus one Latino student who has been to La
Casa but does not work there, I think there are many
miscommunications between La Casa and the people they aim to
serve. To continue this project, interviews and perhaps surveying
of Latino/a students on campus as to what they see La Casa as,
how aware they are of their services, how often they access their
resources would be very beneficial. Though it is unrealistic, I think
having people contact minority students who leave U of I and finding out why would also greatly help in creating retention programs that work. The University, in its financial problems, has dropped or reduced funding for many minority programs – from graduate counseling by the Office of Minority Student Affairs being reduced in scope for minority students to the dropping of the three-day orientation that made Latino/a students see what was offered at La Casa. Retention will continue to be a problem until the university starts taking it seriously and working towards bettering the situation, and until Latino/a students here know that it is a problem and find ways to see themselves through to graduation. La Casa and its workers are trying to do something about it, but are finding many barriers along the way. Yasso, Tara J. “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth.” Race, Ethnicity and Education 8.1 (2005): 69-91.

**Research Proposal:** Abstract My research aims to find the answers to three questions: who is La Casa for, what is the popular understanding of La Casa’s function, and how does that affect the success of this new retention program? Past research by Ethnography of the University Students has suggested that the popular understanding of La Casa is not to improve personal performance in academic arenas, and how some people might feel excluded by La Casa and the larger Latino/a population on campus (Files, 2006; Garcia, 2006). I also found these mentioned by interviewees in my own research. The I-achieve program, being instituted by a group of new workers, hopes to increase Latino/a students’ social networks on campus and off, and bring about self-improvement through goal setting and assessment workshops. This program, however, has had limited response, especially compared to the approximately 2,000 Latino/a students enrolled at the U of I. I intend to investigate why through participant observation, interviewing, and surveying, testing my hypotheses along the way.

**Statement of Research Problem**

Though Illinois itself has a Latino/a population of around 15%, here at the University of Illinois, Latinos/as only compose about 7% of the undergraduate population. Within that 7%, only about 66% of
Latino/a students actually make it to graduation, presenting a problem not only in recruitment but also in retention of Latino/a students. In the 1992 sit-in at the Henry Administration Building in protest of the institutional racism and apathy to Latino/a student needs, students made demands including “we demand that Latino/a graduation figures (i.e. percentages) are to be at least equivalent to the percentage of Latinos in the United States (11.6%).” The Latino population in the states has increased to about 14% since then, and yet the retention percentage, compared to other students, has stayed between 4 and 5 percent.

Thus little improvement has been made overall in retaining Latino/a students, even more disappointing when the Latino/a students of 1992 and 2003 had identified it as a problem and proposed strategies to increase retention. At the heart of this problem is La Casa, which revamped the previous Peer Mentoring program completely to make I-achieve, a program that aims to “aid in retention and academic success in the Latino/a community through an increase in navigational and social capital.” The program tries to give Latinos/as a social network to rely upon in a historically exclusionary university, and instigate self-improvement through goal setting and assessment workshops which pair people based on skills and goals rather than academic discipline.

Limited attendance has been a major issue throughout the semester, however, with lack of understanding on the part of the workers trying to institute the program. When I asked they consistently answered that the
hardest aspect of the program was getting people interested, and continue with it. This program was designed to help all Latino/a students, with their best interests at heart; thus the lack of response is a problem that should be investigated. Two problems that have come to my attention through my own research and through past ethnographers working on La Casa specifically are the purpose of a cultural center and divisions within the Latino/a community along racial and ethnic lines (Files, 2006; Garcia, 2006). In my five interviews these issues have been referenced as well, leading me to believe that they are particularly salient and deserve investigation in relation to the I-achieve program.

**Statement of Proposed Research**

I intend to follow this new retention program to see the effects it has on Latino/a students, and why or why not it is successful. I also will test my hypotheses to see if they are indeed why people are not responding to the program. To investigate this I will not only attend I-achieve events, but other ones as well to obtain an overall picture of how La Casa is perceived by as broad a spectrum of Latinos/as on campus as possible, considering my own interviews have almost exclusively been with La Casa workers. To explore an issue as broad as retention for a particular ethnic group, my research has to reflect the many different perspectives of Latinos/as on campus.

**Methodologies**
My own positionality within the Latino/a population here at the University of Illinois must be revealed to those I am researching because their response to it might give answers to the problems I have identified. I am of Latin American descent, yet only went to La Casa once my freshmen year, until, of course, I started doing research there this year. My own experiences as part-Colombian impelled me to do this research, and might help in my recruiting students to interview in future workshops. I also remember my reaction to the graduate counselor retention program instituted by the Office of Minority Student Affairs, and thus can speak to these issues as well. Thus my “insider” or “native” point of view, as discussed by Twine, might elicit responses that I otherwise might not have.

One of the main methodologies I will be using is interviewing, in a manner like Bourdieu but with significant differences. Rather than asking “leading” questions, I will discuss my own experiences to see how the interviewee responds, which may lead particular answers. This may not be in line with what Foley would describe as a good interview, one in which the interviewer talks too much compared to the interviewee, but I think it is important to make the person feel comfortable and trusting, and the best way to do that is to make it seem less like an interview and more like a conversation. I will be asking questions in which interviewee trust is crucial, and this seems the best way to go about it. My questions will include if the interviewee feel
welcome at La Casa, and why or why not, and to receive an honest answer trust must be built.

I will also follow Bourdieu’s method, in a sense, of interviewing people in places that are familiar and comfortable to them, thus examining the effect of space on a person. I interviewed all the La Casa workers at La Casa, as it is “their space.” My future interviews will have to be conducted outside La Casa, as one of my hypotheses is that despite attending workshops and events at La Casa, some Latinos/as might not feel welcome there, reflected in the non-attendance at subsequent meetings that I observed this semester. I also want to conduct group interviewing that Morgan describes to see how Latinos/as present themselves differently in groups than individually. I will use this method only upon the workers I have already interviewed; I will also use this opportunity to see how they felt their first semester working at La Casa went. This is especially important for my research as it has been documented that “for Latinos, community is essential to survival, not only in terms of neighborhood or geographic locale, but also in terms of collective identity” (Flores 16). The responsibility Latinos feel they have to their community and their family is apparent. These workers have created a community of sorts through bonding in the struggles of being a student and a worker, and trying to recruit people to the I-achieve program; thus their interaction together would be beneficial to observe.
Finally, I will give out surveys to La Casa attendees to obtain general information on how La Casa is perceived by the community, and also questioning what kind of Latino/a they identify themselves as. This may seem intrusive, but is crucial to my understanding of who La Casa is for. I will preface it by saying they do not have to answer of course. My surveys will be a combined open-ended and fixed-choice, as Fink describes. It will be fixed-choice for “what is/are the main purpose/s of La Casa?” (is it a home away from home? Is it there to educate others about Latino/a identity? Does it represent Latino/a interests to the larger university, and thus act as a political tool?), and I will ask them to check all that apply. The Latino/a self-identification will merely ask “how do you identify yourself within the larger ethnic division of ‘Latina? E.g. Mexican American, Puerto Rican-American’”. This will leave some room for explanation as well, if the person choose to do so. Finally, I will continue observing I-achieve to recruit future interviewees, observe interactions that are “least controlled by researcher” as Morgan describes it, and get worker reaction afterwards.

Significance of Research

There have been many studies and programs designed to increase retention and recruitment of minority students, as they have historically been excluded from higher educational opportunities. This seems to be the case at the University of Illinois as well, for only slight improvement, based on the demands of the 1992 protesters and the
report in 2003, has been made to increase recruitment and retention of Latino/a students. This situation has provided impetus on the part of La Casa to try and better those figures and help Latino/a students achieve their goals in life through networking. Through this research, hopefully a better understanding of why this program is not working and what can be done to help the situation can ultimately help minority retention in the long run, and create a more welcoming environment for Latino/a students and other minorities.

References:


Morgan, David L. 1988. *Focus Groups a Qualitative Research*. Sage
EUI Links: Ryan Files’s EUI submission, “What does La Casa mean to its active student population,” has quite obvious links to my own research interests, though differing in significant senses. The questions I gathered from his data collection are what is the purpose of a cultural center, what are the challenges Latinos/as face when entering the University, and of course, who are the active participants and what role do they play within the University. He also discusses the La Casa space in detail, describing the rooms and somewhat the atmosphere. His research will help me quite a bit in my research in comparing how active students perceived La Casa, it’s mission, and their own role as Latinos/as at the University one year ago, and how, if at all, those perceptions have changed. I also hope to expand on the many roles and missions of La Casa by offering research on the academic programs La Casa has installed and changed over the years. Though I found Ryan’s objective to find the overall purpose of cultural centers a bit unrealistic, it did provide me with an interesting perspective. Ryan says how the role of La Casa was seen by many student workers as a “cultural” educating force for Latinos/as and for the University at large, but not as an academic educator. Indeed, my last interview brought up this very problem – how the La Casa constituency sees it as a haven on campus and a “cultural mecca.” The active members I will be interviewing are ones who are involved in creating a program to increase retention by increasing “navigational and social capital,” with lots of opportunities to network with many different people on- and off-campus, and biweekly goal and skills assessment meetings. They are making multiple efforts to get Latinos more resources to succeed here in college and post-graduation. Ryan’s study will help give me some background information of where La Casa was a year ago and how that relates today – crucial, since this is the first year this new retention program is being actively pursued, and I want to know why.

http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1817
Reflect: My research experience has been a very enlightening and challenging one. As my "about the author" reveals, I went in expecting to be unwelcomed, but have since found how caring and enthusiastic these workers are in trying to help Latino/a students of all backgrounds. The program director as well has helped me not only in my research but in my future plans, discussing what I want to do after graduation in depth. I am looking forward to continuing to see the progression of this program. Working with the moodle has been very helpful, as all my research is pretty much on one page, making it much easier to reflect on my different findings. I also hope that by archiving, future papers on La Casa can draw on my findings, much as I have drawn on Edelmira Garcia and Ryan Files' research to support my won findings.

Recommendations: The rate at which minorities graduate is significantly lower compared to non-minority graduation rates; yet, there is no committee or group to discover why minorities leave the U of I. I would suggest that the University have people - maybe through the Office of Minority Student Affairs or other outlets - find minorities who leave the university and follow-up with a phone call or a survey as to why they left. This would hopefully allow for better programming for and a heightened consciousness of the challenges minorities face here.