Editorial

AN OPEN LETTER TO UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS: THE NECESSITY FOR LATINO STUDIES

Dear University President:

It is with great enthusiasm that I write in support of the establishment of a strong program in the growing field of Latino/a Studies at your University. There is no doubt that the establishment of this program will greatly enhance the institution's position in the national academy. After all, as I know you are aware, unlike in the past, a key component of the mission of most universities today entails serving the national community as a whole by creating greater self-awareness and self-knowledge in the society. One aspect of this responsibility is the need to diversify the American imaginary to include the multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds, national origins, cultural roots, and religious traditions that are visibly represented in the population, and which have contributed to making this nation what it is. In other words, by incorporating the historical and contemporary experiences, diverse cultures, and contributions of Latino/as into the curriculum, the University contributes to the greater good, thus ensuring that the institution lives up to its highest ideals as well as to its societal responsibilities. In order to substantiate this point, allow me to discuss some of the pressing issues it raises not only for the University's Latino/a faculty and students but also and equally importantly, for the University community as a whole. Let me review the implications of some of these issues specifically as they pertain to a liberal arts education today.

As you are probably aware, the notion of Latino/as as an ethnic group, recognized as such by the federal government, emerged in 1977 under the name of "Hispanics," bringing together two US historical minorities (Chicano/as or Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans) and immigrant populations, whether recent arrivals or otherwise, from all the Spanish-speaking countries of the hemisphere, as well as from Spain. The current generation of Latino/a college students are thus the first group of Latino/as to grow up defined *as Latino/as* by both themselves and US society. Previous generations were referred to as members of distinct

communities (e.g. Chicano/as or Mexican-Americans; Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, etc.).

This does not mean that members of this generation of Latino/as do not also identify themselves in terms of their parents' national identities and ties to Latin American countries. However, in order to understand fully the identity formation and concerns of this new generation, it is important to recognize that precisely because they have grown up in this country as Latino/as, their schooling, socialization experiences, and sense of belonging to the United States (in short their national identities and citizenship allegiances) have tied their immediate personal concerns and intellectual interests to the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of the communities in which they have been brought up in this country.

The rise in ethnic group consciousness in the United States, however, has not been matched by any significant accompanying curriculum changes, either in high school textbooks or in college curricular offerings. Moreover, as evidenced by the recruitment efforts, actual student enrollments, and hiring practices, relative to the changing demographics in the United States, most institutions of higher learning are still not fully cognizant of the implications of the changing composition of the US-born populations.

The official count of Latino/as is now over 38 million people, making them the largest minority group in the country. Yet according to the March 1999 Current Population Survey report of the US Bureau of the Census, for example, only 11% of all Latino/as are in fact college graduates today. Still, the fact that for the first time in US history, African Americans are no longer the largest minority population in the United States, does have serious consequences both for the future of this society and, hence, for all educators – regardless of their fields of specialization.

Clearly, increased numbers do not necessarily signify increased empowerment. Nevertheless, a number of issues are raised by perpetuating the traditional black–white framework, which is still used to understand the increasingly complex relations and tensions in our society. For example, although the media portrayal of the 1992 Los Angeles riots focused squarely on the history of black–white tensions, a significant number of the protestors were Latinos. A greater understanding of the implications of this phenomenon would undoubtedly contribute to improving our nation's public policy initiatives. Similarly, it is increasingly apparent that the contemporary issues that the growing Latino/a community raise for the nation around, for example, immigration, poverty, language choice and usage, unemployment, racial profiling, or the position of foreigners in our society, require not only additional significant research but also, minimally, a new paradigm for addressing the virulent consequences of racism in our nation. It is essential that we develop a deeper understanding of the ongoing relevance of the historical black/white framework even as we strive to develop new theoretical constructs that can also

account for inter-racial dynamics grounded in the multiple social experiences of Latino/as. Equally important is the need for more research on the implications of Latino/as' varied political status (whether as citizens, residents, immigrants or refugees) as well as of the myriad socio-economic and cultural commonalities and differences among them.

The growing tensions between Latino/as and African Americans or Euro-Americans throughout the 1990s, and into the 21st century – whether in New York, California, Chicago, Houston, North Carolina, or Miami – require our urgent attention as scholars and researchers. For they are at least partial evidence of the increasing presence and frustration of Latino/as concerning the persistent political invisibility and dismal socio-economic conditions in which significant numbers of Latino/as struggle to live their lives. In fact, recent Census reports document that Latino/as have now surpassed African Americans to become the poorest group in this society. This cannot be attributed to the larger number of recent immigrants from Latin America.

According to the National Council of La Raza, Puerto Ricans – who have formally been US citizens since 1917 – are the poorest group within the Latino/a population. Moreover, Census data released on March 8, 2000, show that while 1/4 of the nation's 31 million Latino/as live in poverty, 27% of them are Puerto Rican families, as compared with 24% of Mexican families or 11% of Cuban households. What can this tell us about the need to acknowledge the unusual political status and anomalous place of Puerto Rico in the study and understanding of US history, politics and society? Similarly, there are data to suggest that third-generation Mexican-Americans have a significantly higher dropout rate and lower self-esteem than their US-born parents. Again, from the perspective of understanding the trends in US education, for example, what are we to make of the fact that arriving immigrants fare better in this country's schools than the children of US-born and raised third-generation citizens of Mexican descent?

In other words, regardless of one's ethnicity or field of specialization, knowledge and further research of these conditions as well as of Latino/as' social and cultural specificities is as essential in addressing societal problems such as school dropouts, AIDS, or teenage pregnancy, as it is in understanding the importance of Latino/as today, to political developments across the United States. Along with their significant economic contributions, they are increasingly present and involved in the shaping of regional political outcomes throughout the country.

Will this trend be reversed? Given the available evidence to date, it seems highly unlikely. In spite of the different national origins encompassed by the federally created term "Hispanic," according to a 1997 population report, 55.9% of the then 29.6 million Latino/as were mainland born and an additional 8% were US citizens born in Puerto Rico. The actual figures are much higher given that these percentages do not include naturalized citizens. Still, even then,

the fact remained that the majority of Latino/as in the United States are not necessarily immigrants: rather, they are unequivocally citizens of the United States. Insofar as there are Latino/as who are descendants of Spanish-speaking populations who were on what today is US territory since before the arrival of the pilgrims, it is not surprising that Latino/as are increasingly organizing to demand the civil rights and political recognition afforded to all US citizens. Moreover, given the ongoing immigration from every country in the Americas, the establishment of dual nationality laws by a number of countries in the hemisphere, and the ultimate aim of the North American Free Trade Agreement implemented in 1994 – that is, the development of a common market throughout the hemisphere – the visibility and presence of Latino/as in US society and politics will certainly increase.

The implications of these trends for Liberal Arts education both include and go beyond the issue of whether or not the University's Latino/a students recognize their community's experience in the curriculum. They also direct our attention to the pressing need to ensure that we incorporate this experience as part of *all* students' understanding of the society into which they will enter at the end of their University education. Furthermore, it makes it even more self-evident as to why a major institution such as yours, should commit itself to ensuring that a greater number of Latino/a Studies faculty are present in all disciplines across the curriculum. In making this commitment, the University community as a whole will be in a better position to understand and evaluate the consequences of the demographic phenomena I refer to above.

What we are discussing, then, is actually the means of enriching both the University curricula and the national community in ways that will enable all of us to deal more appropriately and effectively with the overall socio-ethnic and political changes underway. Given these objectives, it makes perfect sense to implement this program together with a responsible increase in the numbers of Latino/a faculty, students and courses, and, in so doing, to support fully their efforts to develop this growing new academic field at your institution. I hope you will agree that at this point the establishment of Latino/a Studies as a legitimate field of inquiry will have a significantly positive impact not only on the education of Latino/as around the country but also of all students attending the University.

I look forward to following the progress of these discussions and to the successful implementation of this very critical program, which I believe will contribute significantly toward enhancing the standing of your University in the academy and the nation.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Oboler

A P.S. to all our readers...

In this, our last issue of our first Volume, we have brought together voices that (re)theorize the meaning(s) of history in the shaping of identity, and address different aspects of the cultural experience of Latino/as from the Caribbean in the United States. In addition, we publish two important Vivencias: one, an interview with the Chicano artist, Rubén Trejo; the other an essay on the nefarious consequences of the “Patriot Act,” for Latinos and for all scholars, as well as an analysis of its impact on our libraries, our scholarship and freedom of thought.

Finally, we are proud to introduce our new section, Páginas Recuperadas, a section that was originally conceived by Roberto Márquez (gracias Roberto!) and which is under the editorship of Silvio Torres-Saillant, one of our journal’s Associate Editors. Focused on recovering lost moments, words, images and events in the history and the experience of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, we hope this section will also contribute to document and thus mark the long presence of Latino/as in the political, cultural and social life of the United States. We invite submissions for this and all the other sections of our journal.

As we finish our first year of publication, there is no doubt that *Latino Studies* is very much a national collective project – the result of the work and enthusiastic support and efforts by editors, board members, reviewers, and readers. We take this opportunity to thank you all and invite you to send us your thoughts and reactions to individual essays, articles and other contributions published in this Volume. We would like to begin a discussion section on the ideas and issues we present in the journal in *El Forum*, our letters to the editor section.

Saludos!

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Latino Studies (2003) 1, 361–365. doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600052