Hispanic, Latine, Latinx How Monolithic Terminology Can Amplify and Erase Millions of Voices

Isabel Soto-Luna

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/crisslibfacpub
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE
Hispanic, Latine, Latinx
How Monolithic Terminology Can Amplify and Erase Millions of Voices

Isabel Soto-Luna

Author Statement

Given the personal topic that this book and chapter speak to, this author would like to acknowledge the way in which her positionality could impact this work.

First, this author recognizes that where she works (the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO)) and lives (Omaha, NE) occupies the traditional treaty lands of the Omaha (UmoHhoN) and Otoe-Missouria Tribal Nations. This author would also like to acknowledge the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, the Santee Sioux Tribe of Nebraska, and the 170 plus other tribes represented within the Omaha area.

Isabel Soto-Luna identifies as a Mexican American, cis-gendered, brown woman and mother who is an immigrant raised in the United States and whose native language is Spanish. As a non-traditional undergraduate student, Soto-Luna attended a Hispanic Serving Institution in Southern Colorado where she worked as a student archives assistant. She serves as the Business Librarian for Criss Libraries at UNO, and is affiliate faculty for OLLAS, the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies also at UNO.

Lastly, this author recognizes that her preferred use of terminology (such as Latine) is personal and may not reflect the way in which others
identify. Personal identity is important, and her intent is simply to use a term that is inclusive of all genders while recognizing the difficulty that Spanish speakers can have with other gender inclusive terms.

**Introduction**

The use of the term Hispanic in the U.S. has long been used as a catch-all for what is a remarkably diverse group of people. Often incorrectly interchanged with the term Latine, many do not understand why the term, along with others like Latine, and Latinx, is both important and problematic. The way people identify is incredibly personal and can be a result of a variety of experiences.

Hispanics and Latines (the U.S. Census counts these groups as one) make up 18.7% of the U.S. population with non-Hispanic African Americans comprising 12.4% of the population (Jones et al., 2021). While the Census Bureau considers Hispanic and Latine as one group, it does at least recognize that these groups encompass various races and so it distinguishes race as separate, allowing people to acknowledge both their race and Hispanic and/or Latine origins. This is important to know because according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. saw a decrease in the non-Hispanic white-only population from 63.7% in 2010 to 57.8% in 2020 (US Census Bureau, 2021) and it is forecasted that the Hispanic/Latine population will grow to over 111 million by 2060 (US Census Bureau, 2018). This means that as the population grows, we will see (and are already seeing) a growth in Hispanic and Latine higher ed students.

As academic librarians, it is important that we recognize and understand the differences in these terms and how our students use them, assuming they use them at all. To truly support Hispanic communities, and in the case of HSI students, it is important to know how the use of the term Hispanic in the U.S came about, the misconceptions around it that have caused strife among varying groups, and why this term (and others) can be problematic. In this chapter, I go over a summarized history of the term Hispanic, its use in the United States, and the ways it has both amplified, such as the classification of Hispanic Serving Institutions, and caused erasure among the Central American, Southern American, and Caribbean American people in the United States. I will also go over how some of the terms used in describing these groups of people came to be, the issues that surround them, and some of the political and immigrant complexities that exist within the community.
While this chapter does not in any way pretend that the topics touched on are a comprehensive explanation of Hispanics and Latines in the U.S., it hopefully does give you a primer into the complexities of the community.

Hispanic

*History and Use in the United States*

Spain, having been part of the Roman Empire, was at one point called Hispania along with the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. As to where the term Hispania itself came from, that is contested. What is not contested is that at some point Hispania turned into España, and Hispanic became symbolic of Spanish speakers. When Spain colonized the Americas, they brought with them their language, culture, and traditions, and imposed them on the Indigenous peoples that existed in these lands. With them they also brought slaves who were also forced to assimilate and become part of the new lands. Today, Spanish is the fourth most spoken language in the world, with only English, Mandarin Chinese, and Hindi used more worldwide (Ethnologue, 2022). In the U.S., however, Spanish is the second most spoken language (US Census Bureau, 2020) with most of the people who speak it originating from somewhere in Latin America (e.g., Central, South, and the Caribbean; US Census Bureau, 2020). Why is this important to know? Because this is part of what has caused the confusion between Latine and Hispanic, the erasure of cultures and races among Latines in the U.S. and throughout the Americas, and the many stereotypes that live on and pit Latines against each other.

So how did the term Hispanic take hold in the U.S.? In her book *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American*, G. Cristina Mora (2014) links the use of the term in the U.S. to the census. With this group having previously been classified as white with European ancestry, activists knew that this meant many were not being counted as their own group and therefore could not be accurately represented, they compromised on the term Hispanic, using the Spanish language to group different nationalities and cultures into one ethnic group. This meant businesses and media now had a group they could market to and serve, and a whole new group of people for politicians to pander to, changing the racial and political landscape in the United States (Mora, 2014).
However, this was not the perfect compromise as the term erased the uniqueness of these cultures and the diversity of races and backgrounds that came with these differences, attempting to turn them into a monolith. And by using the term Hispanic, it still put European influence and whiteness front and center, creating the illusion that all Hispanic or Latine people are white, light-skinned, or brown. This perpetuated white-supremacy and continued the erasure of Black and Indigenous peoples. It also completely ignored the different political and immigration relationships that these countries held with the United States, which were important as these had the power to create division and strife among Hispanic and Latine groups.

Part of that strife is the assumption that all Hispanics and Latines are immigrants and that most must be undocumented, forgetting that many were already here when the United States was expanding, especially in the Southwest and Pacific region of the country. A point that Pedro Garza makes in his 2017 Forbes article “Mexicans Didn’t Immigrate to America — We’ve Always Been Here.”

Puerto Rico, for example, has been a territory of the United States for a long time and Puerto Ricans were given citizenship with the passing of the Jones–Shafroth Act in 1917, a move that had more to do with politics than the people (Melendez, 2017) and that has not always been to their benefit. If anything, Puerto Ricans have found themselves at a crossroads, where those who live on the island do not possess the same rights as all other U.S. citizens, such as being able to vote in the presidential elections. In fact, many people are not even aware that Puerto Ricans are U.S. Citizens (Dropp & Nyhan, 2017) and are often referred to as immigrants in the media, and sometimes even in academia and published works. This has meant that many Puerto Ricans face the same discrimination as immigrants and are seen as foreigners which in many cases has created an us vs. them mentality between Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic/Latine populations (Puerto Ricans as Immigrants and Other Misperceptions, 2018).

People in the U.S. also seem to forget, or perhaps not know if we’re giving them the benefit of the doubt, that while Puerto Ricans are not immigrants, there have been different laws for immigration from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For Cubans, immigration to the U.S. has historically been very different than for those from other countries, starting with the Cuban revolution. In “Balseros, Boteros, and El Bombo: Post-1994 Cuban
Immigration to the United States and the Persistence of Special Treatment,” Todd Henken (2005) talks about the history of Cuban immigration and the welcoming reception received by those fleeing from Cuba during the revolution, which included job and housing assistance, job retraining programs, college loans, and “unprecedented exceptions” to residency and citizenship laws. Most of this came from the anti-communist mentality prevalent in the U.S. at the time. Rafters from Cuba found in international waters were allowed blanket refugee status in the U.S., while rafters from other countries, like Haiti, were deported (Henken, 2005). In 1995, there was a change to how rafters were treated when found which resulted in the “Wet Foot Dry Foot Policy” that meant rafters who made it to U.S. soil could stay, but those picked up in international waters would be deported (Daniels, 2017). However, anyone from any other Latin American country still had to go through a lengthy immigration process and many times were discriminated against and treated as criminals. Because Cuban immigrants were political exiles whose properties were seized by the Castro regime, as opposed to economic migrants, were mainly white and middle class, and were granted special immigration status, many Cubans were able to achieve their full potential in the U.S. (Florido, 2017). This is not to say that the plight of Cubans in this country is not legitimate—the horrors and trauma they lived through are very real—but this distinction created a schism between them and other Latines, one that hasn’t been helped by the support many Cubans give to conservative politicians who are known for discriminatory policies toward immigrants. In 2016, President Obama ended the “Wet Foot Dry Foot Policy” and Cuba agreed to take back those Cubans with orders of deportation as a result of crimes committed (Daniels, 2017). As a result, many Cubans have been pushed further to the right politically seeing the democratic party as socialist, something which they definitely do not support given their history with Castro, even as many new generations of Cubans born in the U.S. have started supporting liberal ideas (Gonzalez, n.d.).

Mexico, the country where the majority of the Latine population in the U.S comes from (US Census Bureau, 2020), has had a love/hate relationship with the U.S. throughout its history. While there have been wars and political strife between the countries, there has also been cooperation. A recent example of that cooperation when it comes to immigration from Mexico is the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was a guest worker program that lasted just over two decades between 1942 and 1964 and allowed over four million Mexican
agricultural workers to migrate legally as the U.S. found itself short of agricultural workers but with a high demand of agricultural products during World War II (Kosack, 2021). It was based on an agreement between the U.S. government, who initiated conversations, and the Mexican government who had misgivings (Kosack, 2021). The bracero workers were mistreated in various ways including improper housing, and were not given adequate medical care or water while the bosses “insisted that they could treat their workers however they wished, since the bracero contracts were merely a ruse to satisfy public opinion and get Mexico to allow the importation of its workers” (Henderson, 2011, p. 204). The program gave start to the paradoxical want for cheap labor while still having a distaste for immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants (Mize, 2011). Ironically, it was the bad implementation of the program in the U.S. and the blacklists that Mexico could create blocking certain U.S. states and counties from participating in the bracero program based on complaints from the workers, that led to many farmers encouraging undocumented immigration (Hernández, 2006). The hypocrisy, of course, was ignored, and has continued to be ignored. During the two decades that the Bracero Program was in place, another less known companion to it came about, “Operation Wetback.” As the Bracero Program was forcing farmers to treat their workers with a small level of decency, farmers from states that had been blacklisted (like Texas) were encouraging undocumented immigration in order to find cheap agricultural labor. At the same time, the U.S. government was painting undocumented and documented workers as criminals, and the women as prostitutes (Ngai, 2014). Under this political climate, “Operation Wetback” began in 1954 with the intention of repatriating undocumented immigrants back to Mexico.

The construction of the “wetback” as a dangerous and criminal social pathogen fed the general racial stereotype “Mexican.” A 1951 study by Lyle Saunders and Olen Leonard, conducted as part of a project sponsored by the Mexican American social scientist and civil rights advocate George I. Sánchez, stated, “No careful distinctions are made between illegal aliens and local citizens of Mexican descent. They are lumped together as ‘Mexicans’ and the characteristics that are observed among the wetbacks are by extension assigned to the local people.” Wetbacks, said one official, were “superficially indistinguishable from Mexicans legally in the United States” (Ngai, 2014, p. 171).
Wetback was, and continues to be a derogatory term for immigrants alluding to undocumented status. The operation ran concurrently with the Braceros Program, and the stereotype of Mexicans as criminals has persisted as can be seen in current political discourse, even when the data shows that this is not true (Ye Hee Lee, 2015).

These are just three examples of the countries from where the largest Hispanic and Latine populations in the United States originate (US Census Bureau, 2020) and the treatment they have received from the U.S. government and its people. Every country in Latin America is treated differently and has different immigration laws that apply to their people. Even though the government has different immigration laws for each country, the Hispanic and Latine population in the U.S. is seen as homogenous and assumptions are made that everyone is from Mexico. While Mexico is the place of origin for most Latines, it is most definitely not the only one (US Census Bureau, 2020). As María Cardona (2016) states in her article “Hispanics and Latinos Are Not All Mexicans, but All Deserve Respect:”

As a Latina woman, I want to hear someone ask me what country I am from instead of assuming I am Mexican, but even more, I need to know that Mexican-Americans and all immigrants are treated fairly as human beings and are not subject to ridicule by misinformed politicians and textbooks. Mexican, Hispanic or Latino—everyone needs to be treated with respect.

The assumptions over the homogeneity of Hispanics and Latines have meant that many cultures, and traditions among the community have been erased or anglicized. Traditions like Día de los Muertos are celebrated all over Latin America, and yet it is seen as a purely Mexican tradition, one that has lost a lot of meaning in the U.S. In the U.S. many equate it to Halloween and dress up as a Catrina without understanding why these traditions exist and what they mean.

The term Hispanic also left out many countries and communities in Latin America that do not speak Spanish as the main language, including Indigenous peoples within Spanish speaking countries who maintained their language and still speak it today. Statistics show that Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico have high numbers of Indigenous Peoples that make up their population, 48%, 43.8%, and 19.4% respectively (Buchholz, Katharina, 2021). Many of these people still speak their native language, 31.9% percent of Bolivians do so as does 49% of the
population in Paraguay (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018). And of course, you have countries like Brazil, whose official language is Portuguese. Are they any less deserving of the services available to Hispanics in the U.S.?

Using language as the classifier also meant that people from Spain are included with all other Hispanic groups, which has led to controversy. Historically, the term Hispanic in the U.S. has been correlated with people of color (POC), ignoring that Hispanics and Latines comprise all races including whites. And in fact, many Spaniards do not see themselves as Hispanic or Latine. In the study “‘I’m Not Spanish, I’m from Spain’: Spaniards’ Bifurcated Ethnicity and the Boundaries of Whiteness and Hispanic Panethnic Identity,” José G. Soto-Marquez writes:

The daily struggle for a distinct European/white identity was the norm for most Spanish immigrants interviewed in New York City. Yet their national sense of self in Spain never revolved around the common ethnic or racial categories we use in daily American life and on nearly every form we fill out. “Hispanic” was something they might have talked about in relation to language or culture back home, but “Latino” was certainly used only for the millions of South American immigrants who flocked to Spain before the 2008 economic crisis. Many of the interviewees even noted that the pejorative term sudacas (a loose Spanish reference to South Americans akin to spics in the United States) was widely used. In effect, most interviewees noted that “racism in Spain was the norm” and that there was tremendous social distance and segregation between Spanish natives and immigrants from Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and South Asia; as Mauricio, a 24-year-old intern at the United Nations, noted in relation to immigrant communities in Spain, “Everybody sticks to themselves; they don’t engage much with Spaniards.” (2019, p. 90)

While not all Spaniards in the U.S. have this attitude, there have been controversies in the media and among Latine groups about them being considered for major awards under “Latin” categories and being described as people of color. Antonio Banderas found himself in this predicament when he was described as both Latino and a POC during the #OscarsSoWhite controversy (Benavides, 2020). This is just one example of the issues happening around inclusivity of Spaniards with all other Hispanics and Latines. The erasure of colonization and the arguments around “proper Spanish” are two other concerns that could be their own books.
And this is the biggest difference between being Hispanic or Latine, who is and isn’t included, and why. Latine encompasses everyone from Latin America, regardless of language but excludes those from Spain as Latin America is comprised of Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. While most in the community do fall under both categories, the distinction is an important one, as even among Latines there are those who still believe that the language does matter and this has caused many to consider Latinidad (Latin-ness) not inclusive enough of Indigenous and Black people in the region. Because of the conflation of Latine with Hispanic, there are also many from Latin America who do not feel comfortable calling themselves Latine.

*Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)*

While the term Hispanic in the U.S. has caused controversy, the new classification allowed for advocates to ask the government for the creation of programs and services for the Hispanic population in the U.S. including the creation of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs).

According to the Digest of Education Statistics, there were approximately 4.1 million Hispanic students registered at HSIs during the fall of 2020 across 24 states and Puerto Rico (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The number of HSIs across the U.S. and Puerto Rico is 569, making up 18% of institutions of higher education with 67% of undergraduate students enrolled at an HSI (Excelencia in Education, 2021).

But unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and many tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), HSIs are relatively new. In the late 70s and early 80s, Hispanic and Latine activists noticed that there were institutions in specific geographical areas of the country that were enrolling a high number of Hispanic/Latin students, but the students’ needs were not being met, and they were not as successful as their white peers. In 1986, starting as a grassroots movement, advocates created the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), coined the term Hispanic Serving Institutions, and became the membership association for HSIs (Santiago, 2006). HACU represented and advocated for these institutions and in 1992 persuaded Congress to recognize the HSI designation and assign federal appropriations towards these institutions (Garcia & Taylor, Morgan, 2017). In 1995, the first appropriation of $12 million dollars was approved by Congress through the “Developing Institutions Program” (Santiago, 2006). This program is also known as Title V.
As opposed to institutions that are created with the intention of serving a specific underrepresented group, like HBCUs and TCUs, HSIs are designated by the U.S. Department of Education and must meet the following requirements:

- is an eligible institution; and
- has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application. (Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) | White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics, n.d.)

In this case, an eligible institution would be one that qualifies as an institution of higher education (Definition: Eligible Institution from 20 USC § 1101a(a)(2) | LII / Legal Information Institute, n.d.). Institutions must also go through an application process in which they need to meet the Needy Student qualification:

At least 50 percent of an institution’s degree-seeking students received financial assistance under: the Federal Pell Grant, Federal SEOG, Federal Work Study, or the Federal Perkins Loan Programs. Or, the percentage of an institution’s undergraduate degree seeking students who were enrolled at least half-time and received Federal Pell Grants exceeds the average percentage of the same at similar (type and control) institutions. (Department of Education, n.d.)

In their applications, institutions must also calculate their Core Expenses per FTE:

Core Expenses are regular operational expenditures of postsecondary institutions (excluding auxiliary enterprises, independent operations, and hospital expenses). These are then divided by the FTE (12-month undergraduate enrollment for the academic year). This measure is then compared to the average value for other similar (type and control) institutions. The Core Expenses per FTE measure must be lower than the average for the institutional group. (Department of Education, n.d.)

Even after going through the application process, receiving the HSI designation does not guarantee an institution access to funds, this process merely grants eligibility to apply for the funds, there are other requirements that must be met to receive Title V grant funding.
There are two Title V grants that institutions can apply for, Title V part A is the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (DHSI) Program and its purpose is to:

- To expand educational opportunities for; and improve the academic attainment of Hispanic students; and
- Expand and enhance the academic offerings, program quality, and institutional stability of the colleges and universities that educate the majority of Hispanic students. (Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) | White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics, n.d.)

Title V part B is the Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA) Program and this grant is meant to:

- expand postbaccalaureate educational opportunities for, and improve the academic attainment of, Hispanic students; and
- expand the postbaccalaureate academic offerings as well as enhance the program quality in the institutions of higher education that are educating the majority of Hispanic college students and helping large numbers of Hispanic and low-income students complete postsecondary degrees. (Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) | White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics, n.d.)

There is also a Title III Part F grant titled Hispanic-Serving Institutions – Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (HSI STEM) and Articulation Programs and is meant to:

- increase the number of Hispanic and other low-income students attaining degrees in the fields of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics; and
- to develop model transfer and articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions in such fields. (Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) | White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics, n.d.)

Each of these grants has their own list of requirements for eligibility, and you are competing against other HSIs for the funding. These other requirements make it difficult for many institutions to receive the funding needed to serve their students leaving equity gaps in higher
Serving Hispanic Latine and Latinx Students in Academic Libraries

Sommer Browning and M. Isabel Soto-Luna

education spending despite the appropriations that Congress designates for HSIs, and having to compete and do all the work of applying for the grants doesn't help. In fact, HACU estimates that HSIs receive only “68 cents for every federal dollar going to all other colleges and universities annually, per student, from all federal funding sources.” (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.)

There are other sources of funding for HSIs, and while difficult to navigate, the designation is a good one to have when handled properly and used in the way it was intended, which is to provide better services, education, and opportunities to Hispanic students. While many institutions that receive the designation do not necessarily put the systems in place to truly support their Hispanic students (these are called Hispanic Enrolling Institutions by some), the benefits to an institution and the students can be very positive.

Hispanic and Latine Identities

*Hispanic vs Latino/a, Latinx, Latine, Chicano/a*

While we have so far gone over the term Hispanic, its distinction from Latine, and the ways in which it is used the U.S., it is also important to know all of the other terms that you may have heard of but are not familiar with or are unsure of how to use. Knowing why they exist and how some people use them to self-identify, or don’t, is important when serving your Hispanic or Latine students. Keep in mind that self-identification is incredibly important, and the definitions below may not hold true for everyone, as the reasons why people identify the way they do are their own and do not need to be quantified.

*Latinx* – a term created in the U.S. to be inclusive of all gender demographics and especially the LGBTQ+ community. While it has grown in popularity, only about 3% of Hispanics and Latines use it with most being women, skewing younger (under 29), predominantly English-speaking, and being college graduates or have some college experience (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). Although the term goes back to the early 2000s, it started being largely popularized in the mid-2010s (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020), and it has caused debate since. The term is not very well known outside of the U.S.

*Latine* – another gender-neutral option for Latino/a, replacing the a or o with an e and can be used for other nouns that are gendered (example:
Hispanic, Latine, Latinx
Isobel Soto-Luna

amigues, niñes, etc.) (Call Me Latine., n.d.). It is becoming more prevalent as more prominent figures use this term. Because of its ease of use in both English and Spanish, it is the preferred term for this author.

Afro-Latine – people from Latin America and the Caribbean who are of African descent. It is estimated that approximately 15 times more slaves were taken to Latin America than the U.S. and that about 130 million of their descendants now live there (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2022a). In the U.S., they make up about 2% (6 million) of U.S. adults, although given the fraught nature of race in Latin America and the fact that people mostly self-identify (as they should), these are estimates and hard numbers can be hard to come by (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2022a).

Chicano/a—a term used by those of Mexican descent whose families have been in the U.S. for generations, recently there have been those who are second or third generation immigrants also using the term. The term was popularized during the Civil Rights era when the Chicano Movement was also in full swing. However, there are those who are not of Mexican descent but worked with the Chicano Movement and have fought for the rights of all Latines and therefore identify as or relate to the term Chicano/a (You Say Chicano, I Say..., n.d.). For gender inclusive purposes, some will use Chicanx, Chican@, or Chicane.

While these are not all of the terms that can be used to describe the Hispanic and Latine population of the U.S., they are the most recognized and popular in academia and the media. There are arguments for which group terms are preferred by who and why, this author has her own reasons for preferring Latine, but at the end of the day, people’s preferences are their own and should be respected. You must also be aware that while these terms can be used for individual identification, some are mostly used for identifying the larger community, and individuals tend to self-identify in very different ways.

Evolving Identities

Most immigrants, 56%, in the U.S. will identify with their country of origin such as Mexican, Colombian, Salvadorian, etc., about 40% of them identify as Hispanic or Latine, and only 4% identify as American (Gonzalez-Barrera, n.d.-b). However, for those who are U.S. born, how they identify changes by generation; about 22% of children of immigrants identify as American, and for third or higher generations that number goes up to 33% (Gonzalez-Barrera, n.d.-b). This tells us that the
majority of the Hispanic and Latine population in the U.S. still relate to and connect with their communities and countries of origin no matter how many generations they have been here in the U.S.

What about Hispanics and Latinos in the U.S. who only speak English? Since such an emphasis has been placed on language for the creation of the Hispanic classification, and is often interchanged with Latine, does that mean that you can no longer call yourself Hispanic or Latine if you don’t speak Spanish? While the majority of Hispanics and Latines say that’s not the case (Lopez, 2016), gatekeeping by Hispanics and Latines who believe that being part of the community means you have to fit within very specific parameters about language and image is very real. In their study “I Look Mexican, So They Assume I Speak Spanish’: Latinx Teacher Candidates’ Experiences with Raciolinguisitic Policing,” Christian Fallas–Escobar, Kathryn Henderson, and Kristen Lindahl (2022) write:

Repeatedly, as Latinx TCs [teacher candidates] reported, Spanish-speaking Latinx interlocutors assumed they spoke Spanish by virtue of their skin color and reacted with surprise or reproach at realizing otherwise. For instance, in their respective language portraits, Alicia explained, “I have had Hispanics walk up to me thinking I speak Spanish (...) because you look Hispanic, you have to speak Spanish,” and Liss accounted that “at work, guests always walk up to me assuming I speak Spanish because I am a very dark-skinned Latina.” As they expounded, looking Latinx (understood as having dark skin) makes them subject to raciolinguistic policing, which triggers negative reactions if the expectation for Spanish proficiency is not met. In this regard, Natalia explained that customers at her job react with great surprise at realizing she only speaks English. As she noted in her language portrait, she feels that such customers “judged me by the color of my skin and assumed I spoke Spanish.” Nicole echoed this experience in her own language portrait when she explained that “because of my Hispanic heritage, many other Hispanics immediately start talking to me in Spanish and then are shocked when I explain I cannot and always ask ‘why??!’”(p. 204)

Even though only 28% of the Hispanic and Latine population in the U.S. say it’s necessary to speak Spanish in order to consider yourself part of the community (Lopez, 2016), they do seem to be a very vocal minority.

Race also plays a factor in how Hispanic and Latine people identify. Yes, the grouping of all Hispanic and Latine people has brought about
more awareness, benefits, and political power, but mostly to white Hispanics and Latines. In the online article “The Problem with Latinidad,” author Miguel Salazar (2019) writes:

Historically, the forging of this ethnic identity has been understood as a necessity in the face of white supremacy and anti-Mexican Juan Crow laws. In response to recent events, it’s been useful for raising awareness of migrant family separations, Washington’s insistence on militarizing borders in Mexico and Central America, and mass shooters warning of a “Hispanic invasion” of the United States. Even so, its most vocal critics, who are often young and black or indigenous, have not minced words in their critique of what they see as an exclusionary identity fabricated by—and for the benefit of—white and mestizo elites and the American political class.

In the article, the “journalists, organizers, and thinkers” that Salazar interviews about Latinidad argue that the term Latino isn’t inclusive of Indigenous and Black people of Latin America (Salazar, 2019) which is one of the many problems of conflating Hispanic and Latine and centering the Spanish language as a measure of how Hispanic or Latine you are. In the process of bringing awareness to the plight of the community, Indigenous and Black voices are being pushed out and lost.

As a result, there has rightfully been a lot of pushback that has resulted in the launching of organizations like Ain’t I Latina, “an online destination created by an Afro-Latina for Afro-Latinas. Inspired by the lack of representation in mainstream media, as well as Spanish-language media...” (Ain’t I Latina?, n.d.), the International Society of Black Latinos who create “awareness of the existence of people who are of Afro-Latino heritage by honoring our rich and diverse cultures” (International Society of Black Latinos, n.d.), and the Afro-Latino Association for Policy & Advocacy, “a non-profit formed to create awareness of the unique cultural impact of Afro-Latinos...” (Afro-Latino Association for Policy and Advocacy, n.d.), to name just a few.

The Hispanic and Latine LGBTQ+ community is another that grapples with issues of self-identity. While the number of self-identifying LGBTQ+ Hispanics and Latinos has grown, this is in part because this group tends to skew younger (Galván, 2022) and are also more likely to have a college education (Wilson et al., 2021). And there have been reports that the Hispanic and Latino community has become more accepting of those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Franco, 2022). However, just
because the community is coming out more, growing, and showing signs of acceptance, doesn’t mean that they don’t face discrimination. It is just the opposite as they are much more likely to be discriminated against than their white LGBTQ+ peers in all aspects including housing, healthcare, jobs, education, etc. (Mahowald, 2021).

There are many other ways in which the identities of the Hispanic and Latine population change over time and generations. Many are moving away from their traditions and becoming more “Americanized,” while others are discovering the roots that for various reasons their ancestors gave up.

Conclusion

Like all other ethnic and racial groups in the U.S., the experiences, cultural expressions, language, parent’s educational attainment, and familial responsibilities will vary wildly among your students. You will find many who will need a lot of language support, and others who only speak English but want to learn the language of their ancestors to connect with their culture. Many are first-generation students, and others have parents who may have attained education all the way up to graduate degrees. Not stereotyping or making assumptions about your Hispanic or Latine students, just like you wouldn’t or shouldn’t about any other group, is key.

So, what should you call your Hispanic and Latine students? Ask. Ask your students, reach out to faculty in the appropriate departments (like Chicane/Latine Studies), reach out to student organizations, have conversations with staff. Let them be the ones to tell you and guide you, not just in how they identify, but also in terms what their needs are. You cannot fit your students into a box and expect them to act accordingly. Like all your other students, these are unique individuals with their own needs, experiences, and backgrounds. Some may need more help than others, and some will need no help at all. Your job is to ensure that the resources they need are available, and that you are doing the work of recognizing, in your services, programming, and collections, that this is not a monolithic group but rather a group of individuals. It is up to you to do the work of decolonizing your libraries so that everyone feels welcome.
References


 Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) | White House initiative on advancing educational equity, excellence, and economic opportunity for Hispanics. (n.d.).


