

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXIV, Number 97, 2 October 2000 — Latinos Celebrate Heritage [ARTICLE]

# Latinos Celebrate Heritage

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■ Students hope to see Latino community at Columbia expand.

Gabriel Pitta, CC '01 and co-chair of this year's Latino Heritage Month committee, encountered a culture shock upon coming to Columbia. Pitta, who was born in Colombia, moved to New York when he was seven years old. His parents left Colombia because of its unstable political climate and, in leaving, had

to give up their professional lifestyles.

His high school, racially speaking, was diverse—one-half white

and one-half black and Puerto Rican. When he arrived at Columbia, where Latinos make up less than

one-tenth of the student body, Pitta said he became "more mindful of [his] racial label." He pledged and joined the Latino fraternity, Phi Iota Alpha, and, through its community service projects, began to feel a sense of Latino brotherhood.

Both Pitta and Melissa Medina, CC '03 and the other co-chair for the Latino Heritage Month committee, are proud of their Latino culture. At the same time, both the students, along with Columbia's Latino Heritage Month committee members, see a need for Columbia's Latino community to expand and integrate into the rest of the student body.

While Columbia's campus consists of about one-third students of color, only 7.3 percent are Latino, according to the University's figures

as of 1998. Pitta, along with the committee, feels that this percentage should be increased.

Consequently, the theme of this year's Latino Heritage Month will be "Crossing borders"—the borders that separate Columbia's Latino community from the rest of the student body.

Those involved in Latino Heritage Month seek integration not only between Latino students and the rest of undergraduates, but also within the Latino community and other minorities on campus.

"We have an extremely diverse community," said Jorge Herrera, senior class president and the educational opportunity chair for the Chicano Caucus. "We all differ in our own little, special ways, and this month shows us how each of our cultures is special, and how beautiful we are."

The term Latino is actually a racial umbrella term, which includes but is not limited to Chicanos, Mexicans, Dominicans, Chileans, Puerto Ricans, and Hispanics. The month strives to celebrate both the differences and similarities between these different Latino cultures, giving students a chance to better understand the scope of Latino heritage.

Also, there is a large emphasis this year on cooperation between Latino Heritage Month and Latina Heritage Month, which, run by Barnard

College students, focuses on the Latina community and the specific women's issues the Latina community faces, according to Pitta. The Latino Heritage Month committee hopes to integrate events and show that while male and female Latinos have some individual reasons to celebrate, they all are part of the Latino community.

Both Latino and Latina Heritage Months will collaborate this October, working together to organize and host a party called "Fuego Latino," which will be held at Barnard and will benefit the Children's AIDS Pediatric Ward.

"Traditionally Columbia and Barnard have had separate months," Medina said. "[But] we're looking to have a lot more events combined together [in the future]."

Additionally, the month's organizers said this year's Latino Heritage Month will improve the bond between first-years and upperclassmen within the Latino community.

Latino Heritage Month also plans to show that the Latino experience, the experience of being a minority, is also present in African-American and Native American culture, Pitta said.

This initiative comes at a time when some Latino undergraduates such as Rogelio Rodriguez, CC '02, are not feeling the unified minority experience on campus. According to Rodriguez, as a Latino he

sometimes feels overshadowed by other minority communities. Rodriguez said that the Latino community is outnumbered by the other communities and feels “some sense of loss” in the face of them.

Consequently, while Latino Heritage Month will celebrate Latino culture, it also will unite and celebrate the minority experience shared by Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans on campus, with a joint event between Native American History Month and Latino Heritage Month in the works.

“We each have our own individual identities,” Herrera said. “It’s time for us to share [it] with others.”

Cultural identity does not operate in a vacuum, according to Pitta. Racial and ethnic cultures must develop reciprocal relationships in which they exchange ideas for people within one culture to appreciate another culture, he said.

According to Pitta, “Diversity comes from interracial interaction. [The] reciprocal relationship in acculturation is enriching.”

One of the big issues that will surface this month is the state of Latino Studies at Columbia, Herrera said. Sharing each other’s identities requires learning about them, Medina said, and having Latino Studies at Columbia is a way for non-Latino undergraduates to begin to appreciate

Latino culture. Many of the Latino Studies classes found in the pencil book aren't offered because of the University's inability to find professors to teach classes that are in such small demand, Medina said.

Latino Studies is currently a major, but not a Columbia department, and numerous student groups have asked for a Latino Studies Department.

This year's Latino Heritage Month will also focus heavily on erasing the negative stereotypes that the organizers say have long plagued the Latino community, both within and outside the Columbia community.

"[Latinos] are not respected enough on campus," Herrera said.

For example, those outside the Latino community have long stereotyped Latino men as "macho" males and Latina women as "submissive"—stereotypes that are far from true, Pitta said.

And, according to Herrera, there exists a notion of the lazy Mexican-American, a sentiment that the organizers of the month hope to eradicate.

Consequently, the month will give non-Latino students a chance to learn what Latino culture is actually like.

Throughout the month, "[other students] can become more sensitive to the issues of Latino students," Student Activities Coordinator Lydia Zendejas said.

**LATINO  
HERITAGE  
MONTH**