

**Why we changed the name of the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies
Department to the Department of Latino Studies and Hispanic Caribbean Studies**
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
New Brunswick-Piscataway Campus

We changed the name of the department in order to better reflect the department's current course offerings, mission, student body composition, and faculty scholarship. This memo outlines some of the main theoretical, epistemological, and pragmatic reasons that motivated the name change.

Choice of Name

After considering different possible names that would better reflect the current mission and future goals of the Department of PRHC Studies, we have decided that, although "Puerto Rican" would be eliminated from the title, "Hispanic Caribbean" should be maintained in addition to the newly added "Latino" component. Hence, the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies Department has been renamed the Department of **Latino Studies and Hispanic Caribbean Studies**. We believe that this new name will successfully reflect the department's current scholarship in the area of Latino Studies, while also granting the department a unique and privileged position in U.S. Latino and Latin American Studies scholarship by emphasizing our interest in the Caribbean as identity and broadly-defined geographical referent. By including "Latino" and "Hispanic Caribbean" in the title, we seek to promote hemispheric and transnational approaches that more adequately consider the ways in which both U.S. Latino and Caribbean populations are transformed by globalization, while maintaining deeply localized historical legacies. We believe that maintaining "Puerto Rican" in the title would be redundant, since most Puerto Rican populations would in fact be represented under both "Hispanic Caribbean" and "Latino."

The name change requires that we examine some of the issues that have arisen out of past attempts to change the department's name to "Latino Studies." The last time that the name change was attempted was in the mid-1990s. At that time, community activists and former alumni forcefully opposed the change of name on one particular ground: they were afraid that a change of name would "erase" the history and contributions of Puerto Ricans to the very creation of the department in the 1970s and, more broadly, to the current politics and civic welfare of the State of New Jersey. The assumption then was that by retaining "Puerto Rican" in the title, students taking courses in the department would be aware of the important contributions of Puerto Ricans to Rutgers and to ethnic studies in general. Nevertheless, even with "Puerto Rican" as the first word in the department's name, few students truly relate the name to the history of the Puerto Rican struggles and community involvement at Rutgers. Instead, many Latino students assume that the department's name has to do with who the department serves and, thus, the non-Puerto Rican Latino students (who now constitute the majority of the Latino students at Rutgers) have argued that they are hesitant to take classes in a department that "privileges" the history and concerns of Puerto Ricans over those of other groups.

This perspective suggests two main issues: first, there is a need to write the history and mission statement of the Department of PRHC Studies in a way that honors the historical and institutional contributions of Puerto Ricans, particularly of the Puerto Ricans who fought for a “Puerto Rican Studies” department in 1971 and who continue to be involved in local community projects. Documenting that history, rather than simply insisting on privileging “Puerto Rican” in the name, is what would truly honor the contributions of Puerto Ricans to the creation of the PRHC Studies Department. Secondly, it is important to distinguish between the problem of pan-ethnic labels as the sole lens through which to understand the experiences of groups of Latin American and Caribbean backgrounds versus the use of “Latino” as a disciplinary rubric that would allow for a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the experiences and concerns of these populations.

Pan-ethnic labels are problematic for multiple reasons. They are often presumed to “erase” national distinctions in favor of more “watered down” categorizations. These categorizations are often based on an apolitical “multiculturalist” discourse aimed at folklorizing essentialist identities, rather than recognizing the politics on which those identities have been socially constructed in the U.S., Latin America, and the Hispanic Caribbean. Nevertheless, Asian-American, Africana, and Latino Studies as fields of scholarship continue to provide useful templates for the development of academic and theoretical understandings of identity formation, systems of power and subordination, and transnational community building, by enabling comparative, interdisciplinary and translocal perspectives. In fact, it would also be erroneous to assume that the nationality-based identifications privileged by “Puerto Rican Studies” or “Chicano Studies” supercede all other forms of identity formation in the U.S.. Recognizing the multiple configurations of identity formation in the U.S. is perhaps one of the main contributions of “Latino Studies” and other multidisciplinary programs (e.g. Women’s Studies). Latinos are gendered, racialized, sexed, and classed in particularly problematic and contested ways in the U.S. Rather than insisting on distinctions based only on national origin, the study of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean populations needs also to look at how such national affiliations affect more complicated processes of identity and community formations. Rather than “erasing” national distinctions, thus, Latino Studies as a field examines how those distinctions are contingent along multiple axes of difference, including gender, sexuality, class, race, language, geography and generation.

By changing the name we hope to emphasize that “Latino Studies” programs should not exclude scholarship centered on the social, political, and economic histories of the Latin American and Caribbean countries and nation-states from which Latino migration to the U.S. originates. In fact, it is a key goal of our department to consider such histories from transnational and global perspectives, and focus on the ways in which the histories of Latin American and Caribbean nations are in fact implicated in the contemporary political, social, and cultural realities of diasporic populations. In this sense, national histories are hardly only the “background” to the study of Latino communities in the U.S.; rather, they are a critical element in the production of translocal identities, languages, politics, and cultural productions.

Topical Areas

As discussed above, the name change from Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean Studies to “Hispanic Caribbean and Latino Studies” need not be accompanied by a complete change of orientation in the curriculum, since many of our current courses actually address the main areas of inquiry in Latino Studies. In particular, Latino Studies as an academic field has centered on four main areas of scholarship:

- 1.) **HISTORY and MIGRATION**—This area focuses on the examination of historical antecedents to the contemporary life of U.S. Latinos, by considering the particular histories and relationship between the U.S. nation-state and specific political (and military) interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean region. Works that account earlier historical periods function as chronicling the long standing presence and impact of specific Latino groups. As like other fields of inquiries, Latino Studies scholars seek to inter-relate the interactions of individual circumstances, decision-making, motivations, and initiatives with the parameters or constraints of the social structures comprising the U.S. system
- 2.) **CITIES, SPACES, NETWORKS**—Latino Studies has analyzed community formation as processes by which urban spaces configure viable, active, and sustainable neighborhoods, cities, and conceptions of space in local and transnational terms. Defining community in cities also takes the forms of communities of culture and interest. Social networks, organizational life, residential and migration patterns, and internal economies help define communities of culture. In addition, the bonds, rituals, and practices within Latino communities serve to establish particular group parameters. Latino Studies research analyzes the dualistic themes of similarity and diversity within each Latino national origin community. Variations based on generational distance, cultural practices and traditions, socioeconomic status and mobility, rural vs. urban residence are some bases marking difference. .
- 3.) **CULTURAL PRODUCTION, LANGUAGE, MEDIA, PERFORMANCE**-- Latino Studies has engaged in explorations of Latino communities in terms of cultural and linguistic expression, performance, theatrical/literary production. Latino Studies scholars view “culture” as dynamic, adaptive, and multi-dimensional, so that cultural attributes and manifestations associated with one's home country are not identical with cultural life in the U.S. Latino scholars address their attention to the agents of cultural production, modes of transmission, as well as the manifestations and diversity within the Latino community. Latino Studies scholarship critically examines and challenges longstanding concepts of “assimilation,” “acculturation,” and “multiculturalism,” by invoking complicated notions of “hybridity” and representation.
- 4.) **IDENTITY**—Latino Studies has engaged in the exploration of class, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, by insisting on a portrayal of the U.S. as multi-racial and multi-cultural rather than Black and white. This perspective has done much to

expand both knowledge bases and theoretical perspectives, by constructing paradigms, concepts, and additional inter-relationships to interrogate critical aspects of Latino experiences. By focusing on the multiple concepts deployed to mark difference, including ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, and gender, Latino Studies scholars aim to examine how these various identities complement or reinforce each other. Even though the reference to Latino Studies generally portrays a panoramic view of the various Latino communities, the attention of scholars lies within specific Latino nationalities (i.e. Mexican, Colombian, Puerto Rican, etc.).

- 5.) EDUCATION, PUBLIC POLICY, POLITICAL ECONOMY—Citizenship, civil rights, language and educational policies, as well as empirical studies of Latino/a political behavior, immigration and naturalization, and educational attainment have been concerns of a sizeable contingents of Latinos/as scholars. Hence, politics and political economy, with an emphasis on economic justice and labor markets, social movements, public policies, and legal studies have been long-standing interests of Latino Studies scholarship. The examination of empowerment is another critical area of emphasis within the Latino Studies literature. Themes of subordination, class oppression, capitalism, colonialism, institutional racism, and political alienation are a few of the frames of reference. Latino Studies serves for the examination of the power relations between the Latino community and the U.S. nation-state.

The areas listed above have constituted Latino Studies scholarship for the past two decades or so, and are also represented in the current course offerings of the PRHC Studies Department. As previously named, the PRHC Studies Department does not reflect the substantive academic areas of scholarship being produced in the department or, more generally, in the field of Latino Studies nationwide. Moreover, the name of the department did not acknowledge the experiences of a growing population of Rutgers University student who are U.S.-born of Latin American parents from countries other than Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, or Cuba (as the “Hispanic Caribbean” has been arbitrarily defined, which incidentally excludes the Colombian, Venezuelan, and Brazilian Caribbean coastal populations, for instance). While an effort must be made to increase the number of Puerto Rican students recruited to Rutgers (perhaps by drawing closer ties with New Jersey public high schools in areas such as Newark, Trenton, etc), the composition of our current student body suggests a diversification of the Latino population equivalent to that of New Jersey as a state. Dominican, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Colombian, and Mexican students are growing in number, as well as mixed students who see their Ecuadorian-Brazilian or Mexican-Dominican or Puerto Rican-Dominican identities more reflected by the “Latino” label. Currently, the PRHC Studies Department was not, by definition, addressing the needs of the growing populations of U.S.-born or raised Colombians, Ecuadorians, or Mexicans students. While the historical experiences of these groups are of course unique, there are also some commonalities that develop among members of U.S.-born generations of Latin American and Caribbean ancestry in the context of being racialized as “Hispanic” or “Latino” in the U.S.

As current research foundation work has suggested, there is a greater recognition of Latino Studies as an important vehicle to attaining a hemispheric conception of social difference and cultural expression. An example of this is illustrated by the Social Science Research Council workshops on “Race in the Americas” or “Translocal Cities.” At both of these workshops, the research agendas put forth emphasized the importance of comparative Latino studies, as well as a reconceptualization of racial formations in translocal and/or transnational contexts.

A Brief Institutional History of “Latino Studies”

The political history of “Latino Studies” as a field is extensive, dating back to the militant origins of “Chicano Studies” and “Puerto Rican Studies” in the late-1960s and 1970s. These units were forged from grassroots activism and social movements that were national in scope and grounded in the principles of inclusion and equality. During the 1980s and 1990s, Latino Studies as a field matured and philanthropic foundations like Ford, Rockefeller, and Mellon awarded fellowships and promoted the training of a cohort of Latino Scholars. Currently a multidisciplinary academic field, Latino Studies examines the localized and transnational experiences of Latin American and Caribbean national origin populations in the U.S. While some academic units have retained “Chicano” or “Puerto Rican” on their name, most of them have recognized the importance of acknowledging the increasingly diversified national origins, social class, and demographic characteristics of U.S.-born Latinos and Latin American migrants. The creation of national professional associations and a number of journals on Latino Studies also contributed to reinforcing the interdisciplinarity of the field.

Latino Studies (and ethnic or race studies more generally) has produced scholarship that reinterprets important episodes of U.S. history and society, develops an array of innovations in curricula, designs a culturally sensitive pedagogy that questions hierarchical student-faculty relations, and generates new epistemologies and methodologies to deliver university-generated knowledge to the community at large. For the purpose of this memo, we focus on “Latino Studies” as a potential academic unit of instruction, rather than “Latino Studies” as a field of study.

“Latino Studies” has been institutionally configured in various ways in U.S. universities. In addition to existing as autonomous academic units, Latino Studies has also been a field accommodated under presumably broader institutional centers and departments, such as “Ethnic Studies” (UC-Berkeley), “American Studies” (Yale), Centers for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (Columbia), and even “American Cultures” (U-Michigan). While a conceptual premise of “Ethnic Studies” is that the history of racialized populations in the U.S. is distinguished by oppression and exclusion, “Centers for the Study of Race and Ethnicity” and “American Studies” programs tend to deny the centrality of race by considering the incorporation of Latin American populations to be comparable to the assimilation of European immigrants of the past.

Recent academic articles should help our friends and students develop a framework for understanding our name change: One article by Agustín Laó-Montes, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, titled “Latin American Area Studies and Latino Ethnic Studies: From Civilizing Mission to Barbarian’s Revenge;” second, Pedro Cabán’s “Three Decades of Latino/a Studies”; and finally, an article by Maite Junco that appeared in the New York Daily News (3-22-2004) titled “Adios, ‘Puerto Rican’; ‘Latino’ Use Grows with Diversity”.

Laó-Montes’s article examines the geo-political and academic contexts in which Latin American Area Studies and Latino Studies emerged in the U.S., by focusing on the specific connections that these two academic fields have to U.S. foreign and domestic policies regarding populations from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Lao-Montes discusses the influence of the Cold War and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the creation of Area Studies and Latino Studies, respectively, as well as the identity politics and U.S. political aspirations that sustained these academic developments. Lao Montes explains the distinct regional trajectories that Latino Studies has followed, by describing the often-charged transition from nationality-based departmental models of ethnic studies (e.g. Puerto Rican Studies in the Northeast or Chicano Studies and “La Raza Studies” in the Southwest) to “pan-ethnic” departmental configurations (e.g. Latina/o and Latin American Studies at UIC or Latino Studies at Cornell). This article is useful in placing the proposed name change in broader historical and institutional contexts.

Cabán’s article offers a historical overview of the trends and issues that have emerged in the course of the development of Latino Studies and Latin American Studies academic units in various universities in the U.S. Particularly relevant to our proposed name change is Cabán’s discussion on the relatively recent trend toward unified frameworks to study the intersections of Latino and Latin American/Hispanic Caribbean Studies. As Cabán explains, for almost two decades, Latino and Latin American Studies worked in virtual isolation from each other, partly due to the radically different histories of these academic fields. While Latin American Studies emerged as an academic field relatively privileged by the university because of generous funding from the national security state for area studies during the Cold War era, Latino Studies was imbued with a militancy that oftentimes challenged the university’s legitimacy as a site of learning.

Maite Junco’s New York Daily News article describes the growing use of “Latino” not only as the title of academic departments, but also in not-for-profit and public policy agencies in New York. As Junco explains, the “35-year-old Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department at CUNY’s Hunter College was renamed the Africana and Puerto Rican/Latino Studies Department two years ago.” Junco also takes into account the heated controversy that usually surrounds such politically-charged name changes, particularly among activists who have maintained the predominantly nationalist postures of the 1960s and 1970s. This article is helpful in recognizing that name changes, while always enmeshed in politically charged controversy, ultimately come to reflect the demographic, historical, and political changes brought about by rapid globalization, transnational affiliations, and cross-fertilization in cultural expressions.