

Building Community: The Latin American Student Experience

Identifying strategies to develop and improve
social and communication networks
among international students of Hispanic background

Andres Gabriel Villamizar Maldonado

International Student Adviser

International Student Support
Health, Wellbeing and Development
Monash University, Caulfield Campus, VIC 3145

Andres.villamizar@adm.monash.edu.au

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of the Monash University students of Hispanic background who kindly accepted to share their experiences and opinions as international students in Melbourne. I would also like to thank my colleagues in International Student Support within the Health, Wellbeing and Development directorate at Monash University for their continuous support and encouragement of my research, for allowing me to freely present and deliver my ideas for innovative projects and for sharing the belief that any small initiative can have a great and positive impact on the experience of international students.

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Executive summary

The study reported in this document explores the perceptions and attitudes of international students of Hispanic background on their experience at Monash University and the different factors which influence their involvement in campus-based activities compared to off-campus community based events.

The participants are 14 international students who are members of the Monash Hispanic Community Club (registered and unofficial members). They were contacted via the Facebook group Monash Hispanic Community, created by Andres Villamizar with the following vision:

A space for Hispanic students at Monash University, their friends and other Australian and international students who share a genuine interest in the Spanish and Portuguese languages and Latin American and Spanish culture (Monash Hispanic Community group, 2007).

The data was collected via a self-administered paper-based questionnaire and informal conversations with currently enrolled international students of Hispanic background at Monash University. In addition, the survey was also distributed to former international students of Hispanic background who have studied at Monash University within the past two years.

The results show consistent feelings of pride of the Hispanic cultural heritage and Spanish language and openness to interactions with international students of different backgrounds. Additionally, a desire to improve exposure to Australian culture by meeting and interacting with domestic students and a sense of difficulty when wanting to meet other international students of Hispanic background were demonstrated by the survey results.

Based on the participants' experiences and ideas, this report concludes with suggestions towards identifying the most efficient strategies to develop and/or improve social and communication networks among international students of Hispanic background, as well as with domestic and international students from other backgrounds studying in Melbourne.

Introduction and background

This project was inspired by ongoing observation within International Student Support (ISS) at Monash University of situations where international students of Hispanic background have reported being disappointed in their endeavours to meet fellow students from South and Central America on their campus. In addition, they have also expressed a feeling of failure to experience the 'real' Australian life and an unsatisfactory improvement of their English language skills, due mainly to a lack of opportunities for interaction with domestic students.

According to Australian Education International the number of Latin Americans enrolled in education and training programs in Australia in 2007 will exceed 20,000, up from 7,500 in 2004 (Blight, 2007). Furthermore, a study presented by Allison Doorbar and Tony Crooks from the University of Melbourne at the Australian International Education Conference in Melbourne in October, 2007, reports that enrolments of Latin American students in higher education institutions in Australia have increased 14.3 percent from 2006 and 23 percent since the start of this year (Rout, 2007). Qualitative results of Doorbar's interviews with more than 100 Latin American students in Australia, suggest that "Latin American students seem to integrate and make friends better than your typical Asian student does," (Doorbar as cited in Rout, 2007). This statement contradicts the several comments I have listened to in conversations with present and past Monash Latin American students. These students have expressed their frustration when their attempts to make 'Aussie' friends fail and they feel that there is not a support network because 'there are no other Latin Americans around'. Paradoxically, there have also been cases in which students reported spending most of their time with compatriots, whom they had already known prior to coming to Australia. These students have admitted that although they feel more 'at home', they believe that 'their English is not going anywhere'.

Kate Smart from the University of Canberra presented a study of the support needs of Latin American students in Australian education at the National ISANA Conference in Sydney, 2006. Smart's interviews with 35 Latin American students depict specific values of Latin American culture and their effect on adjustment to Australian culture (Smart, 2006). The conclusions drawn by Smart relate to Latin American students' collectivism, sensitivity and sense of self-worth. This may explain their frustration when feeling detached from fellow students who share their cultural background and their sense of failure when identifying themselves as 'outsiders' from Aussie culture. Smart states that the wellbeing of a group of people is always held in more regard than the individual within Latin American culture (Smart, 2006). Moreover, Hofstede, in a comparative scale on individualism by country,

positions Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina within those with highest tendencies toward collectivism. Horstede defined collectivism as a person's focus on relationships with others and group membership (Hofstede, 1984, as cited in Hall, 2002).

Smart highlights three more aspects positioned very high on the values list of Latin American culture: harmony and integrity, along with the extreme avoidance of all confrontation (Smart, 2006). This was reflected on a comment made by a postgraduate Mexican student who expressed her concern when feeling neglected by her business professional Australian classmates. She said, "I joined evening tutorials so I could have the chance to meet Aussie students who come to class after work and not only internationals, but the Aussies are so busy that they only come in, sit there and leave and I never get a chance to talk with them". She also added, "I know I should be practising my English but I don't know how to start conversations with them."

One of my roles as an international student adviser at Monash University is to serve as a staff mentor for a student club or society on campus. Since my journey at Monash University started in 2001 as a Colombian international student, it seemed appropriate to be allocated the role of mentor for the Latin Club when I started working in ISS in 2005. Due to small numbers (i.e. less than ten members), this club did not have the status of officially registered club within the rules and regulations of MONSU, the Monash University student association at Caulfield campus, until September of 2007. The following statement explains MONSU's guidelines for starting a new student club or society:

All course-based, cultural, spiritual, social or interest-based (non-sporting) clubs must begin their lives as registered groups. This is a trial period of sorts that helps your group to develop and grow without the hassle of lots of paperwork. Unlike an affiliated club (the next step), a registered group operates outside the MONSU Caulfield financial system and does not have to complete affiliation paperwork...All you need is ten Caulfield student members, at least two student organisers and heaps of enthusiasm to get the ball rolling (MONSUCAULFIELD, 2007).

Being an international student at Monash Caulfield for three years I became aware of the very small numbers of Latin American students within the campus' student body in comparison with larger cohorts, such as those from China and South East Asia. When I started working as an international student adviser I endeavoured to identify enrolled international students from South and Central America, as well as Spain, in order to start planning social and support activities that could be of their interest and

get an idea of possible attendance. By running a report by students' country of origin, I found that in July 2005 this cohort consisted of only 48 students between the two largest Monash campuses in Victoria, with 36 at Clayton and 12 at Caulfield. The majority of these students were enrolled in one or two semester exchange programs through the Monash Abroad office.

I realised that running events with an exclusive invitation to Caulfield Latin American students would not be very sensible because attendance could be minimal. My main motivations to run these sort of events were to establish a communication channel with this cohort, to help them identify fellow students with similar cultural background and to acknowledge them as a small but important component of Monash University's student body. Therefore, I decided to open these activities to all Monash University students of Hispanic background and to encourage them to extend my invitation to fellow domestic and international students who could be interested in joining these types of gatherings for various reasons (e.g. interest in learning or practising Spanish or Portuguese languages, curiosity for Latin American culture, predilection for Latin American food or music, background affinity or pure friendship).

The inaugural activity in semester two 2005 consisted of a Mexican themed luncheon, which offered Mexican style food, Spanish music and a space to meet fellow Latin American students. Forty-eight students were invited via email and 14 attended. The turnout was far less than expected, but considering that it was the first 'Latin American' activity of the semester and students from both Caulfield and Clayton campuses attended, it was still satisfactory. An email list was created and there was talk about consolidating the club to make it officially registered, setting up a committee and planning follow up activities. Unfortunately, attendance to the next gathering (i.e. screening of a Colombian film and afternoon tea) sponsored by ISS was very poor, which disappointed those who actually made an effort to be there.

In subsequent semesters, combining efforts with the Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) and Monash Overseas Student Services (OSS), ISS has sponsored other Latin American themed activities, such as an afternoon party with a Salsa demonstration by professional Cuban dancers and Mexican inspired games (e.g. breaking a Piñata filled with lollies) during Monash Caulfield's Multicultural Week. Both of these events were highly attended by a vast majority of international students of diverse backgrounds but only a handful of Latin Americans.

A new approach

The experiences previously mentioned motivated me to evaluate my approach when organising and facilitating activities tailored to the needs and interests of international students of Hispanic background. In order to better understand the attitudes with which they see and receive social interactions with peers from the same or similar cultural backgrounds, I decided to change my strategy. I wanted to focus on assisting them to establish a strong communication network, rather than simply organising get-togethers without very optimistic expectations.

I needed to investigate what other programs, activities or special interest groups tailored for the needs of Latin American students were already in place within the Monash community. The only other scheme organised by Monash staff or students I found was the Spanish and Latin American Club (SLAC) at Clayton campus, the largest of the six Monash campuses in Victoria. This student club is advertised on the Monash University Clayton campus Clubs and Societies webpage:

The Spanish and Latin American Club (SLAC) is the fun and exciting way to meet new people whilst engaging in the greater Spanish and Latin American Community of Melbourne. The club promotes the use of the Spanish language, and Spanish and Latin American Culture, by providing a meeting ground for like-minded students. The club offers Spanish conversation classes, tapas and bar nights, Spanish film festival outings, free BBQs and sangria, Latin Dance classes, live music nights, and heaps more. So come and join SLAC, and get involved in the vibrant and passionate Spanish and Latin American community of Melbourne (MONSUCAULFIELD, Spanish and Latin American Club, 2007).

This student club has great potential to become an established outlet for interaction between Latin American and domestic students within the Monash community. However, in my opinion, there are pitfalls in terms of the club's communication channels and the apparent imbalance between the numbers of domestic and Latin American students within its members. Only two of the 24 Latin American students who agreed to participate in my research were aware of the existence of SLAC. One of these students reported experiencing difficulties trying to communicate with the Club's committee to find out about their upcoming events and was not aware of any other Latin American student being involved in the organisation of this club's activities.

My next step consisted of investigating Monash Latin American students' awareness of other groups within the broader Melbourne community that could cater for their specific interests and/or needs. I also wanted to find out about their involvement in these groups or organisations.

Student involvement and communications

Based on the results from the previously mentioned trials to get a Latin American group/club started, the two main challenges identified were the lack of a student leader to be at the group's forefront and a standardised communication channel which could be accessible by all potential members.

Although during previous activities a few students expressed a desire to get involved in the planning and delivering of future events, their interest always seemed to decline as the academic semester progressed. Fortunately, during Orientation week in semester two 2007, I had the opportunity to meet Gabriela Tejada, a Mexican international student who had just enrolled in a Masters degree with the Faculty of Business and Economics. Just as the majority of Latin American students I have met in the past two years, Ms Tejada shared her initial feeling of astonishment when she first arrived in Melbourne, facing a reality completely different to her expectations. She said, "When you are in Mexico and you are coming to Melbourne you think you are going to meet a lot of Australians and hang out with them, but there are hardly any Aussies in my classes, let alone other Latin Americans."

Ms Tejada wanted to find the best way to get in touch with fellow Latin American students. I explained that every start of semester I greet new and currently enrolled students from South and Central America, as well as Spain, with a "Welcome Monash Hispanic Community" message on behalf of the ISS office at Monash Caulfield. I also shared with her the communication challenges I have faced in the past, exacerbated by the inaccuracy of personal email addresses provided by students in their applications, and currently enrolled students' habit of not checking their Monash student email periodically. As a consequence students miss out on invitations to social and support events and important administrative information. Ms Tejada mentioned she had resolved the issue of managing various email addresses (e.g. Hotmail, Yahoo, Gmail, etc.) simply by diverting them all into one which she checks daily. She added that she also stays permanently in touch with her family in Mexico via Facebook, an Internet social utility which seems to be one of the most popular electronic communication tools people are using worldwide.

Facebook is the second largest social network on the web, behind only MySpace in terms of traffic. There are over 8 million users in the U.S. alone and membership expands worldwide to 7 other English-speaking countries, with more to follow. According to an internal September 2005 survey, approximately 85% of the students in the supported colleges had a Facebook account, with 60% of them logging in daily. A survey conducted by Student Monitor revealed Facebook was the most 'in' thing after the iPod and tying with beer. ComScore Media Metrix discovered users spend approximately 20 minutes everyday on Facebook (Yadav, 2006).

Although I remained somewhat sceptical, I decided to create a Facebook group. I called it Monash Hispanic Community and promoted it as "A space for Hispanic students at Monash University, their friends and other Australian and international students who share a genuine interest in the Spanish and Portuguese languages and Latin American and Spanish culture" (Monash Hispanic Community group, 2007).

I sent an invitation email to all currently enrolled Latin American students in all Monash campuses, asking them if they knew about Facebook and if they were interested in joining an online group, with the idea of staying in touch with fellow students of Hispanic background, even if they were unable to physically meet. Within hours I received replies from a few of the recipients expressing their excitement about finally having a group specially designed for them on such a widely used playground, such as Facebook.

Ms Tejeda, who was already an expert on Facebook and its applications (e.g. photos, groups, events, friends, profiles, message wall, fun wall, etc.), took upon herself the task of sending an invitation to join the newly created group to not only the few Latin American students she knew but also other international student of diverse backgrounds who had expressed their interest in learning about Latin American culture. The great majority of students she contacted already had an active profile on Facebook; therefore, for them it was only a matter of clicking on the 'join this group' button on the Monash Hispanic Community group page.

I also shared the news about the creation of the Monash Hispanic Community Facebook group with a few Monash staff members who work in Monash Abroad and at the Student Service Centre, whom I knew have taken Spanish language lessons in the past. They were very happy to join the online group and to invite staff and domestic students to be part of it.

In less than a week, the Monash Hispanic Community Facebook group had 15 members and after one month of its creation, more than 40 had joined and were in regular communication. During these communications, there were discussions between members about getting together on campus, and a few students started to ask if there would be any events (i.e. parties) that they could attend.

As this new communication network strengthened and students' interest in getting together was clear, the opportunity to create a physical Monash University club was eminent. "Community networks, once they achieve certain levels of success or critical mass must have a formal infrastructure. The challenge is to keep the momentum going (Morino, 1995, as cited in Miller, 1999, p.7)."

Week four of the semester was Multicultural Week at Monash Caulfield. This would be the perfect outlet to give the Monash Hispanic Community group exposure and recruit at least ten members, in order to register the group as an official Monash University student club. A committee was needed, but at this stage Ms Tejada was the sole student member willing to dedicate her time and effort to consolidate the club. With her enthusiasm and tenacity Ms Tejada earned the position of president of the soon to be the Monash Hispanic Community Club.

With the assistance of ISS Ms Tejada set up a Monash Hispanic Community Club stall at the Monash Caulfield student lounge. Ms Tejada decorated the stall with a Latin American theme, recruited a few fellow Mexican students as funding members and asked a couple of them to help her promote the club by giving information flyers to passing by students and encouraging participation in the Multicultural Week activities. Within two hours, enough members had been recruited to officially register the club. New members included three students from Mexico, one from Colombia, one from Thailand, two from China, one from Singapore, two from Germany and one domestic student who said his dream was to travel to South America and learn salsa.

The Monash Hispanic Community Club became a registered club within the regulations of MONSU Clubs and Societies in September 2007. The next step was to become an affiliated club which would entitle its committee to an annual club grant provided by MONSU Caulfield to fund activities, as well as many other privileges (i.e. MONSU insurance coverage, Monash vehicle hire, use of the club resources room). In order to gain the status of affiliated, a club needs to have a minimum of 40 members and show vigorous performance (e.g. social or academic events, workshops, community involvement) throughout the academic semester (MONSUCAULFIELD, MONSU CAULFIELD Clubs and Societies, 2007).

The club needed an inaugural event in order to get exposure and to provide an opportunity for virtual members of the Facebook group to physically meet. ISS and the Monash Hispanic Community Club's president organised a Kick-off party at one of the on-campus cafés. Facebook was again the main channel used to invite students to the event. The invitation was extended to Latin American students and their friends. There was also liaison with the student president and committee members of the Euro-Club, as some of them had also registered with the Monash Hispanic Community Club. Attendance to the event was more than satisfactory with a mix of Latin American, European, Asian and Australian students from two Monash campuses, as well as staff members from various support services. Latin America-inspired games and Spanish language music were key component of the entertainment, together with salsa and merengue dancing. The feedback received was very positive; club registrations increased and the question, "When is the next event?" kept coming up.

Given that a great percentage of the population of Latin American students at Monash University is from Mexico, it was decided that the next event would be a celebration of the Mexican Independence Day. Mexican international students agreed that it would be a great opportunity to share this significant date of their culture with Latin American students from other countries. They also believed that a Mexican theme would attract international students of various backgrounds and Australians.

With a very small budget and negotiation with a bar owner in Melbourne's CBD who provided the venue free of charge, the party was organised for Friday the 14th of September, the night before Independence Day. Students organised the music, one very technologically skilled Mexican visitor prepared a video with patriotic images, invitations were sent via Facebook and the rest heard by word of mouth. Attendance was beyond anyone's expectations. A total of 140 people showed up throughout the night. A crowd made of Latin American students from Monash and various other universities in Melbourne along with their Australian and international friends enjoyed a very entertaining evening. Afterwards, the Facebook Monash Hispanic Community page was decorated with several snapshots of the night and great feedback was posted on the group's message board. The money collected from the \$5 entry fee provided the Monash Hispanic Community Club with a budget sufficient to fund future events. "Community networks must generate some funds from charging fees for some of its services and also from long-term, guaranteed sources of funding (Morino, 1995 as cited in Miller, 1999, p.8)".

Positive outcomes of the successful Mexican Independence Day party were that two more students offered Ms Tejeda their support to form an official club committee, assuming the positions of vice-president and treasurer, and connections with other Latin American students and their organisations

within the broader Melbourne community started to flourish. Since the party, communications with members of the Latin American Student Association (LASA) at Melbourne University have begun through Facebook. This association invited the Monash Hispanic Community group to Fiesta Latina, a fundraising event open to all Latin American students in the Melbourne wider community and their friends. For the last official Monash Hispanic Community activity of semester two 2007, Ms Tejeda and her committee sponsored 20 of its current members to attend Fiesta Latina. It was reported on Facebook that the tickets for Fiesta Latina sold out and Latin American, Australian and international students from all backgrounds and various universities attended.

Understanding Latin American students' views on their community network

Ultimately, my aims as staff mentor are for the Monash Hispanic Community Club to establish solid foundations, consolidate a hard-working student committee and become a fully independent affiliated club. I want them to have the capacity to organise, fund and deliver original activities and events tailored to their specific needs and interests. In order to achieve these outcomes, I recognised the need for research that would demonstrate efficient strategies to develop networks among students of Hispanic background, the wider Latin American community in Melbourne, and with the increasing number of Australian and other international students who are genuinely interested in learning about Latin American culture.

Informal conversations with Latin American students and online chats with members of the Monash Hispanic Community group laid the framework I used to formulate the following eight research questions.

Research questions

1. Are students of Hispanic background at Monash University interested in meeting each other?
2. How do students of Hispanic background at Monash find each other? How do they communicate?
3. What is the attitude with which students of Hispanic background approach social interactions with peers from the same or similar cultural backgrounds?
4. What is the attitude with which students of Hispanic background approach social interactions with domestic students and with other international students of different backgrounds?

5. What are the perceptions of students of Hispanic background at Monash University towards the interest of Australian and other international students in learning about Hispanic culture and Spanish and Portuguese languages?
6. Do students from Hispanic background choose to participate in on-campus activities? How involved are they in the organisation of such events? Would they like to take active part of this organisation?
7. How involved are students of Hispanic background in community events in Melbourne? Do they know about events which involve elements of their background? Do they prefer such events in comparison to on-campus activities?
8. What are the most efficient strategies to develop networks among students of Hispanic background as well as with the increasing number of Australian and other international students who are genuinely interested in learning about Latin American culture?

Research Methodology

Due to time constraints and the multi-campus nature of Monash University, neither face-to-face interviews nor focus groups with enrolled international students of Hispanic background were feasible methodologies for this research. The most suitable option was a paper-based questionnaire to be posted, self-administered and returned in a pre-paid envelope. I designed the questionnaire (see appendix) combining a series of multiple choice and open-ended questions and asked participants not to identify themselves. This was done to encourage them to freely express their perceptions and opinions on the topics.

I used Facebook as a recruitment tool by posting a message on the Monash Hispanic Community group's wall. Considering that only 30 out of the 48 current members of the Monash Hispanic Community group on Facebook fit the criteria for my survey (i.e. Hispanic background), I was overwhelmed by the fact that 24 students expressed interest in participating in this research.

At the end of the two-week deadline given to the participants to complete and return their questionnaires I had a total sample of 14 students (i.e. nine from Mexico, two from Colombia, one from Costa Rica and one from Venezuela). They are currently enrolled or have recently completed degrees in the faculties of Business and Economics, Arts, Science and Engineering. Participants' age ranges from 21 to 31 years. Nine of them have been studying at Monash University for one year or less, with the great majority choosing Melbourne because of its multicultural nature and relaxed lifestyle.

Six participants (42%) took English language courses before enrolling in their principal course. These ranged from 10-week English Language Bridging Program (ELBP) at Monash University to 40-weeks English for Future Studies.

Data analysis

The data gathered was analysed by comparing the attitudes and perceptions of international students of Hispanic background towards their social interaction with the following cohorts:

- Other international students of Hispanic background
- International students of non Hispanic background
- Domestic students

I considered the following factors in attempting to obtain a clear understanding of their points of view:

- Age
- Country of origin
- Time spent in Melbourne
- Time studying at Monash University
- Reasons to have chosen Melbourne to study
- Having undertaken English language courses before their main course

I focused on findings related to the following items in regards to the three cohorts previously mentioned:

- Contact and interaction
- Preference for a particular cohort
- Communication channels
- Type of community activities and participation
- Impact on their experience as international students

Findings

According to the data, the great majority of the participants have formed friendships mostly with other international students of non-Hispanic background. Their second largest poll of friends is composed of their compatriots, followed by domestic students, and lastly by Latin Americans from other countries different to their own. In regards to the latter two groups, two of the participants made a point of categorising these relationships as acquaintances, not friends.

“For international students is easier to make friends with other international students (including same country). It's not a 'preference' but sometimes Australian students prefer to keep in contact only with Australians, they are not as 'open' as other international students.”

“Yes I prefer my cultural background. The main reason is that I prefer a closer link than with an Australian, probably because we don't share the same views on uncertainty management nor take things for granted.”

“I think I spend more time with people from my country (Mexico) because of all we have in common and that makes a friendship much easier.”

Fifty percent of the participants expressed that although having friends from their own country made them feel 'at home' they experience feelings of guilt and frustration for 'not integrating with Australians'. They also recognised that spending time with their compatriots was an obstacle in improving their English language performance.

“Well, obviously with students from my country I feel more 'at home' but I do try to see everybody because otherwise I would not be integrating/adapting.”

“It's good to have a few friends from my country (Mexico) but I'm really interested in getting to know Australians, which is hard, because only then will I experience the feeling of living in this country. The whole point of coming here was to learn about Australia and its culture, without knowing the people you can't know the culture.”

“When I was learning English I felt that it was a disadvantage because I was tempted to speak Spanish. But they make me feel at home. It's good to have Latin feelings around”.

The majority of participants felt that comparing experiences with other international students of Hispanic background helped them obtain a better understanding of the locals' behaviours and Australians' perceptions of Latin America.

“They helped me understand Australian citizens and their behaviour. Made me confirm that Latin Americans are welcomed people in this country”.

"I am very thankful with the guidance I've received from the International Student Support in terms of activities and introducing me to other Latin Americans as the adaptation process in this country has been so hard. Everything seems so quiet and empty sometimes. Anyways I guess it's normal".

All participants surveyed expressed feeling extremely proud of their cultural heritage. The majority also agreed on their hesitation when being asked about their country's socio-political situation and economic stability. Furthermore, two of the research participants who are originally from Colombia reported feeling stigmatised by the topic of illicit drugs traffic originating from their country.

"I think that having continuity to the Hispanic Club will attract more Australians and international students. Having parties mixed with Latin American presentations will entice people in our countries. Big Day Out focus in Latin American bars or pubs could also help to motivate new people to become members. I took out all my friends to Salsa Nights, we had a lot of fun and the only Latin American was me, the rest were Indians, Russians, Chinese, Omanis, Europeans and Africans."

"1 out of 10 Aussies are interested in real stuff and 8 out of 10 will have a joke related to drugs. I'm from Colombia".

"They ask mainly too much about drugs, how much it costs? And pretty much everything related to it".

Fifty percent of the participants reported having struggled getting to know 'Aussies' and gaining a place in their already established group of friends. However, once they gained membership, it has made a positive impact on their perception of life in Melbourne.

"It's important to know local people. However it's hard to consolidate relationships."

"Knowing Aussies improved my understanding of the country, taught me things, made me enjoy many Australian things and learn the idea they have from us."

“I think it is sometimes disappointing to be in Australia and not meet any Australian students I don't know why. It would seem that instead of integrating into one whole, some international students stay in their own groups, so maybe to have little 'festivals' or any excuse to get everybody together would be a good idea. I think the fact that there are clubs helps a lot to promote Latin American culture.”

“I appreciate the effort that International Student Support is putting into trying to develop networks among Latin American students. However, in my point of view, it is more important to focus the efforts into trying to integrate international students with local students, given that there is where the challenge and difficulty lies for us that don't belong to any group that has inherent links to Australian students other than the university. I believe that international students get more value out of being able to establish relationships with local Australian students than to try to recreate a small replica of their own society and culture in Australia.”

Preference for specific types of community activities showed a direct link with the age of the participants. Younger students considered off-campus parties with music and dancing the best way to promote interaction between fellow Latin Americans, domestic students and other international students. Older participants thought of more practical uses of their interaction with peers during on-campus activities, focusing more on the need of academic assistance and opportunities for career development.

“More cultural (music, plays) and sport activities. Try to create art, sport contests to create new things in teams with students from different backgrounds.”

“Clubs is a great idea. Maybe more focus on social activities (party, trips), study help (e.g. students accountants can help MBA's with that particular subject and so on).”

“As an international student from Colombia, the fact to come to Australia is a high investment. Due to my visa status to work here in my skill is very difficult. Monash has activities (like conferences and breakfasts) to assist students to find a job in their skill, but so far all the activities they have done only apply for students with permanent residency status. There are other companies, or projects that we could work with our visa status (student visa), but so far I haven't seen any of those. For the rest is excellent and extremely happy with the education and the University in general.”

“Conferences, breakfasts, all kind of activities that help me find a job in my skill. Friendly meetings are excellent, but my main goal is career development. I would like to hear experiences from other Hispanic people about their successful jobs, what do they do? How did they achieve it? Etc.”

All except for one of the students surveyed were unaware of other groups within the Melbourne community that could cater for their specific interests and/or needs. Instant online messaging (e.g. MSN) and Internet social utilities, such as Facebook, proved to be the most popular methods of communication among the majority of the cohort. Minimal costs, easy access to computers on campus and long periods of time spent in preparing assignments which require online research contribute to this preference. Having access to a user-friendly online social network (e.g. Monash Hispanic Community) has shown to be attractive to these individuals with common interests (e.g. Spanish language, Latin American music, community events) and/or similar circumstances. The tendency of seeking familiarity seems to be alleviated by features such as being able to share experiences and photos, comparing tastes on videos and music, inviting and being invited to events, establishing contact with friends of their friends, and staying in touch with their families in their home countries.

A student initiative profiled

During my research I found Co-operation 21, a website created and run by students in tertiary education institutions in Victoria and New South Wales. Co-operation 21 provides access to volunteer opportunities in Spanish-speaking communities in Australia and Latin America, educational support, community engagement and work experience in Spanish-speaking organisations (Co-operation 21, 2007). In my opinion, this is a valuable example of a student initiative which reflects the growing numbers of Australians interested in Latin American culture. It is a suitable outlet for students of Hispanic background to share their traditions, language, music and other aspects of their heritage.

“Co-operation 21 is such a fantastic venture to be embarking on, all of us together, in bringing together likeminded people, both Latins and non-Latins, and promoting this culture. It will be really fulfilling to be able to work with other groups and know that we are not alone in our projects!” Zoe Dauth – Executive Board, Co-operation 21

Recommendations for support staff

The purpose of this research was to present Latin American international students' views on their student experience and the different factors which influence their involvement in campus-based activities compared to off-campus community-based events. An additional aim was to share strategies to develop networks among international students of Hispanic background as well as with the increasing number of Australian and other international students who are genuinely interested in learning about Latin American culture. Within the research process there was a great amount of interaction with the participants and also with past students and members of the wider on-campus community who have engaged with Latin American students. They have provided me with valuable feedback and encouraged me to carry on with a project with this small but significant student cohort. These interactions involved staff from Monash Abroad, Marketing and Student Recruitment, MONSU Caulfield Clubs and Societies, Monash Sport, lecturers from the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education and ISS staff involved in peer mentoring and language exchange programs.

When organising transition and social activities from an international student support office, it is very easy to fall into the dangerous assumption of a ready-made formula to encourage involvement of international students. With large cohorts, it may be easier to see trends and programs may have satisfactory attendance. With smaller cohorts, such as international students of Hispanic background, it is advantageous to establish a direct and transparent connection in order to understand their specific values and interests and cater for their needs.

As an international student support professional, in order to help a small cohort build a strong community network, it is crucial to first investigate potential contributors, such as existing clubs and/or societies, student or staff-organised programs, and community-based or online-based groups. It is fundamental to gain knowledge of their communication channels, learn how to use them and employ them to get a message across (i.e. Internet social utilities). Liaising with external organisations can assist in the planning of activities. It is often advisable to take advantage of already existing programs or events which can be a social outlet for students (e.g. attending events organised by other clubs or institutions). It is also fundamental to ask about the most suitable times, location and type of activity depending on the group's age range, academic University schedules and physical accessibility (in the case of multi-campus institutions).

It is an imperative role of the international student support staff to identify those students who genuinely desire and are available to assume the group's leadership. Empowering the student leaders and assisting them in forming a responsible committee is worthwhile, as the committee will be able to provide expert input in the planning and delivery of activities. Supplying the group or club with some kind of initial funding and providing them with guidelines on seeking further sponsorship also play a key role as a staff mentor.

Finally, in the case of international students of Hispanic background, it is vital to acknowledge them perhaps not as one of the largest cohorts in tertiary education institutions in Australia, but as one with a very rich and colourful culture, which is often welcomed among domestic and international students of other backgrounds. Help the Hispanic students understand that in the current Australian education environment there are fewer Latin Americans than other nationalities, but that should not hinder their desire or ability to proudly showcase their culture.

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Appendix: The Survey

Building Community: The Latin American Student Experience

Investigating strategies to develop networks among international students of Hispanic background as well as with the increasing number of Australian and other international students, who are genuinely interested in learning about Latin American culture.

This survey is a research instrument for the paper “Building Community: The Latin American Student Experience”, to be presented by Andres Villamizar, International Student Adviser – Monash University, at the ISANA (International Education Association) 18th Annual Conference from 27 to 30 November 2007, Adelaide.

It will produce findings about the opinions and experiences of international students of Hispanic backgrounds studying at Monash University. Both students and the University should benefit from these findings, which may lead to the improvement of the Hispanic students’ experience.

Please complete the following questionnaire and return it in the self-addressed envelope ***by Friday 5th of October***. On the last page I have provided a space for you to add any comments you would like to make about this survey, about its relevancy to your experience as a Hispanic international student at Monash University or about specific issues that you think should be addressed to assist in developing networks among international students of Hispanic background as well as with the increasing number of Australian and other international students, who are genuinely interested in learning about Latin American culture.

The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. Please DO NOT sign or write your name on the questionnaire or self-addressed return envelope.

Andres Villamizar
International Student Support
Monash University
Caulfield campus, Building A, room A1.29
900 Dandenong Road, Caulfield East, VIC 3145
Tel: 9903 2689 Email: Andres.villamizar@adm.monash.edu.au

SECTION A: ABOUT YOU

A1. What is your age? _____

A2. Are you a male or female? _____

A3. What is your living arrangement in Melbourne?

- Home-stay
 - University accommodation
 - Renting by myself
 - Renting with friends
 - Other, please explain
- _____

A4. How long have you been in Melbourne?

_____ weeks
_____ months
_____ years

A5. How long have you studied at Monash University?

_____ semesters

A6. Why did you choose to study in Melbourne?

A7. What course are you studying?

A8. Did you take an English language course before your current degree in Melbourne?

- Yes
- No, please go to question A9

A9. What type of English language course was it and how long was it for? (e.g. Language for Business, 10 weeks)

A10. Which country do you originally come from?

A11. What do you miss from your home country? (e.g. the people, family, food, etc)

SECTION B: ABOUT YOU & OTHERS

B1. Do you try or have you tried to make contact (and/or make friends) with other international students from your home country in Melbourne?

- Yes
- No, please go to question B7

B2. How do you meet or have you met friends from your home country in Melbourne?

- Randomly outside the University
 - Through another friend
 - At the University
 - In class
 - Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
 - Other, please explain
- _____

B3. Approximately how many friends from your home country do you have in Melbourne? _____

B4. Approximately how often do you make contact with your friends from your home country in Melbourne?

- Every day
 - Once a week
 - A few times a week
 - Once a month
 - Other, please explain
- _____

B5. What is your preferred way to communicate with your friends from your home country in Melbourne?

- Phone call
- Text message
- Email
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B6. Please explain how knowing those students from your home country, has affected your stay in Melbourne?

B7. Do you try or have you tried to make contact (and/or make friends) from other South and Central American countries or Spain in Melbourne?

- Yes
- No, please go to question B13

B8. How do you meet or have you met those friends from other South and Central American countries or Spain in Melbourne?

- Randomly outside the University
- Through another friend
- At the University
- In class
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B9. Approximately how many friends from other South and Central American countries or Spain do you have in Melbourne? _____

B10. Approximately how often do you make contact with your friends from other South and Central American countries or Spain in Melbourne?

- Every day
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a month
- Other, please explain

B11. What is your preferred way to communicate with your friends from other South and Central American countries or Spain in Melbourne?

- Phone call
- Text message
- Email
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B12. Please explain how knowing those students from other South and Central American countries or Spain, has affected your stay in Melbourne?

B13. Do you try or have you tried to make contact (and/or make friends) with Australian students in Melbourne?

- Yes
- No, please go to question B19

B14. How do you meet or have you met Australian students while in Melbourne?

- Randomly outside the University
- Through another friend
- At the University
- In class
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B15. Approximately how many Australian students are your friends with? _____

B16. Approximately how often do you make contact with these friends?

- Every day
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a month
- Other, please explain

B17. What is your preferred way to communicate with these friends?

- Phone call
- Text message
- Email
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B18. Please explain how knowing those Australian students, has affected your stay in Melbourne?

B19. Do you try or have you tried to make contact (and/or make friends) with international students from other cultural backgrounds in Melbourne?

- Yes
- No, please go to question B25

B20. How do you meet or have you met international students from other cultural backgrounds in Melbourne?

- Randomly outside the University
- Through another friend
- At the University
- In class
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B21. Approximately how many international students from other cultural backgrounds are your friends in Melbourne? _____

B22. Approximately how often do you make contact with these friends?

- Every day
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a month
- Other, please explain

B23. What is your preferred way to communicate with these friends?

- Phone call
- Text message
- Email
- Internet social networks (e.g. Facebook)
- Other, please explain

B24. Please explain how knowing those international students from other cultural backgrounds, has affected your stay in Melbourne?

B25. Do you have a preference between spending time and/or making friends with students from your same country or cultural background and Australian and international students from a different background? Please explain

B26. If you talk with Australian or international students from a different background than yours, do they express interest in getting to know more about your country and/or your culture?

- Yes
- No, please go to question B28

B27. What aspects of your culture (or country) do Australian or other international students seem most interested in?

B28. What aspects of your culture (or country) do you like to share with Australian or international students from a different background than yours?

B29. Are there aspects of your culture (or country) which you would rather not discuss with Australian or international students from a different background than yours? Please give examples?

B30. How do you feel about Australian or international students from a different background than yours learning about your country, your culture and/or speaking your language?

SECTION C: AROUND YOU

C1. Are you aware of the available social activities at your University campus?

- Yes
- No, please go to question C3

C2. How do you find out about on-campus social activities?

- University electronic newsletters
- University clubs and societies
- Through friends
- Printed advertisement (e.g. posters, flyers)
- International office
- Other, please explain

C3. Which do you think are the best ways to advertise and promote participation in on-campus social activities at Monash university?

C4. Do you attend or have you attended on-campus social activities? Please explain why or why not.

C5. Do you participate or have you participated in the organisation of on-campus activities? Please explain why or why not.

C6. Are you a registered member of a Monash University club or society?

Yes, which organisation(s) or club(s)

No

C7. Are you a member of a club or society outside Monash University?

Yes, which organisation(s) or club(s)

No, please go to question C11

C8. Do you attend or have you attended activities organised by this club or society? Please explain why or why not.

C9. Please explain how being a part of this club(s) or organisation(s) has affected your stay in Melbourne?

C10. Besides the Monash Hispanic Community Club, are you aware of other club or society at Monash that promotes communication between international students of Hispanic backgrounds?

Yes, please provide details

No

C11. Do you participate or would you like to participate in on-campus activities and events tailored for the community of international students of Hispanic background? Please explain why or why not.

C12. What type of on-campus activities would you most likely enjoy as an international student of Hispanic background?

C13. Do you participate or would you like to participate in on-campus activities and events, which include social interaction with Australian students and other international students from different cultural backgrounds? Please explain why or why not.

C14. What type of on-campus activities would you recommend to help integration among international students of Hispanic backgrounds and Australians and other international students?

