

# Hispanic students sound off: what Hispanic Heritage Month means to them

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Alpha Cindy Avitia High School, East San Jose, California, students (from left) Cesar Lopez, Zuleyma Ponce, Abraham Espino, Itzel Linares and Michelle Ortega. Photo by Christina Pirzada

On August 30, as students at Alpha Cindy Avitia High School in East San Jose, California, begin the new school year, five students walked into a classroom. As their chairs moved around, the sound of the chair legs squeaked against the floor. They were not there to take a class or study. The Hispanic students had gathered to talk about Hispanic Heritage Month which starts on September 15. After introducing themselves, the conversation began with the first question.

"Do you know what Hispanic Heritage Month is?" the students were asked.

A resounding "no" filled the room.

"A mí me suena como que, en vez de estar celebrando a los que realmente vienen de allá (Latinoamérica), se lo están celebrando a los hijos de los que vienen de allá," sophomore Michelle Ortega offered. Translated, Michelle said that Hispanic Heritage Month sounded like a celebration of Hispanic heritage for those who are children of parents from Latin America. In other words, she felt it was not for her.

Hispanic Heritage Month is a national effort to pay tribute to the generations of Hispanic Americans who have contributed to and enriched the United States. The celebration is led by various federal organizations including the Library of Congress, National Park Services and other major entities. Started in 1968, the event was initially only a week long under President Lyndon Johnson, but has since turned into a monthlong celebration under President Ronald Reagan in 1988. Every year, it begins on September 15 and goes until October 15.

So, what is Hispanic culture? Hispanics themselves don't have a definitive definition because they themselves are a diverse group, who share some aspects of their lives but differ in so many ways. After all, Hispanics come from over two dozen Spanish-speaking countries. There is no singular narrative for Hispanic immigration to the United States; each story is unique.

To Michelle and the other students at her school, Hispanic Heritage Month did not seem to celebrate all of their cultures. Celebrating the many different traditions of all the Spanish-speaking countries can be difficult, and the cultures that are celebrated often confuse Hispanic students. Day of the Dead is a good example. The holiday is celebrated in several Latin American countries, but the way each celebrates it is different.

Zuleyma Ponce is from El Salvador. There, she says, Day of the Dead is not celebrated like it is in Mexico. It is a more somber affair. The colorful altars and lively calavera- (skulls-) filled festivities are scaled down to a simple cemetery visit to leave roses. "El día de los muertos sí se celebra, pero no así como en México, solo se les llevan rosas a los muertos."

The students echo a common feeling among most Hispanics in the U.S. A Pew study found that 71 percent of Hispanics say they each have a different culture while only 29 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. say they share a common culture.

It may not be a surprise then that during Hispanic Heritage Month much of the focus is on Mexican history and culture. The United States has a long history with its southern neighbor that goes back more than two centuries. To this day, the government and citizens of each country play a crucial role in the development of each country. According to the latest U.S. Census, at 63.4 percent, the majority of the Hispanic population in the United States is of Mexican origin. Another 9.5 percent are Puerto Rican, 3.8 percent Salvadoran and 3.7 percent Cuban.

The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" can be confusing because they are often used interchangeably, even though they have distinct definitions. Hispanic refers to Spanish-speaking individuals including those from Spain and most of the communities in South America, with a few exceptions.

## Celebrating All Americans: Hispanic Heritage

From September 15 to October 15, we celebrate the histories, cultures and contributions of Americans whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central and South America.

### Who is Hispanic?

Hola, ¿cómo estás?



#### Hispanic

People who speak Spanish as their first language

#### Latino/Latina

People in the U.S. who are from, or descendants of people from, Latin America



Spanish is a gendered language. Adjectives end in -o or -a depending on whether you're talking about a boy or a girl. In order to include people of all gender identities, the term "Latinx" is often used.

#### Latin America

All of the countries in Central and South America, as well as Mexico, which is part of North America, and some in the Caribbean.

Not everyone in Latin America speaks Spanish. For example, Brazil is a Latin American country, but people there speak Portuguese. Also, millions of people in Latin American countries speak an indigenous language, such as Quechua or Aymara.

Brazil, the largest exception, is home to 207 million people who speak Portuguese, not Spanish. Latino refers to people from countries in Latin America including Brazil. It does not, however, include all Spanish-speakers, such as people from Spain.

Both of the terms were coined in the United States for the U.S. Census. In 1976, U.S. Congress passed a law called the "Joint resolution relating to the publication of economic and social statistics for Americans of Spanish origin or descent," which created the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" to make it easier for the Census to collect the information of U.S. residents of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Central American, South American and European descent. The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" continue to be used today.

Tenth-grader Abraham Espina believes the two terms are an easy way to generalize people from Latin America or who speak Spanish, but he personally doesn't identify as either. "Latino puede ser cualquiera, me pueden decir latino, aunque soy mexicano," he said. "Referring to me as a Latino can be anyone, I can be called Latino even though I'm Mexican."

None of the students identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic. Tenth-grader Cesar Lopez identifies himself as Honduran, although he is often mistaken for Mexican.

The Spanish language is an export from the Spanish conquistadors. It is one of the few things Hispanics have in common, even though there are notable differences in their dialects. Cesar speaks about his experience while making his journey to the U.S. The native Honduran had to drop his native accent and adopt Mexican colloquial jargon to blend in while in Mexico. Now that he is in the U.S., he is often mistaken for being Mexican. Zuleyma, who is from El Salvador shares that she, too, is often mistaken for being Mexican, as it is often assumed that all Spanish-speaking folks are from Mexico.

Despite the dominance Spanish has among the Hispanic population in the United States, there are many languages in Latin America. In Mexico alone, there is an immense diversity of cultures and languages. Abraham is from Mexico and said there are indigenous people who speak Zapotec. Were these indigenous people who inhabited Central and South America before the arrival of Spanish conquistadors, considered Hispanics or Latinos? Is it accurate to generalize these communities with these terms that were created in the U.S.?

"Sinceramente, yo siento que son como los primeros, porque ellos son el principio de nuestras raíces," said Abraham. "I sincerely think they have been there since the beginning and that is where we trace our roots from." Therefore, the terminology we have created doesn't apply accurately to these communities, since we do not have the right to rename or determine their identity. They already have their own.

Abraham also thinks that many Latinos and Hispanics have culture and traditions that date back to their indigenous ancestors.

If language, culture and traditions are different among Hispanics and Latinos, is there anything that unifies them? Michelle believes there is something. She thinks that Latinos in the United

Where is Spanish an official language?



States share many common values that brought them to the United States. "Tal vez muchos tenemos culturas diferentes, pero como latinos hay algo que nos une, que es el trabajo y estudios o mejores oportunidades," she said. "Maybe we have different cultures but as Latinos here we share some things that unite us like hard work, education and better opportunities."

Michelle herself has big dreams. She wants to give back to her community by becoming a lawyer. "Creo que es una manera de ayudar a gente en problemas o que necesita ayuda", she said. "I think it's a way I can help people in trouble that need help." Other careers students are pursuing are engineering, criminology, veterinary and professional soccer.

The bond Spanish language has at connecting the students is strong and it's evident across the entire Hispanic population in the United States. The latest Pew study found that 38 percent of Latinos are bilingual and among U.S.-born Hispanics, more than half, 51 percent, are English dominant.

Students who speak English with an accent are often subject to ridicule from peers.

Zuylema and Cesar both said they have been made fun of.

"Ellos no entienden, no se ponen en nuestro lugar ni se dan cuenta de qué tan difícil es aprender (el idioma)," said Cesar. "They don't understand. They don't put themselves in our shoes and see how difficult it is to learn (the language)." Cesar says it's easy to learn a new language when you're a kid, but as you get older like in high school, he wishes his peers understood how difficult learning a new language can be.

Michelle feels similarly, voicing that she feels most comfortable practicing speaking in English in a bilingual class, where she has the option of using Spanish as well, when needed. Michelle appreciates different languages and loves the challenge of learning a new one. It was one of the biggest differences she noted when she moved to the United States from Mexico.

"Cuando llegué aquí, hay diferentes culturas, diferentes idiomas, y a mí me gusta eso porque se aprende más sobre otras culturas," said Michelle. "When I came here (United States), there were so many different cultures, different languages, and I like that because you learn new things about other cultures."

Students not only want to learn from each other, but they want to celebrate the different cultures.

Zuleyma and her friend have always wanted to start a culture club at school "donde los estudiantes se unan a celebrar más sus culturas y conocer más acerca de cada país a través del baile, la comida, etc.," she said. "Where the students can get together to celebrate cultures and learn more about each country through dance, food, etc."

Hispanic Heritage Month is a good start at celebrating culture and identity. Having the month begin on September 15 was intentional to mark the independence days of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. On September 16 Mexico celebrates its independence. On September 18 Chile celebrates its independence.

On October 12, Columbus Day is celebrated in the United States, but in Latin America it is celebrated as Dia de la Raza or Day of the Race. Many Spanish-speaking countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and Venezuela reclaim and celebrate their heritage and culture instead of celebrating the Italian explorer who colonized the region.

The students like being in the United States, but are still very proud of where they and their families came from.

"Estoy orgulloso de ser mexicano", said Abraham.  
"I'm proud to be Mexican."

As they learn a new language and practice new traditions like Halloween and Thanksgiving, they are happy to embrace these while maintaining their own.

"Nos adaptamos a la nueva cultura de alguien más sin dejar nuestra cultura. Pienso que nuestras culturas y raíces son muy importantes y no debemos solamente ir a un nuevo lugar y olvidar nuestras raíces," said Itzel Linares. "We adapt to someone's new culture without giving up our own. I think that our culture and roots are very important and we shouldn't go to a new place without forgetting where we came from."

### Did you know...

- ▶ There are **470 million** native Spanish speakers.
- ▶ Spanish is the official language of **20 countries**.



- ▶ There were probably around **1,750 languages** spoken in Latin America at the time that European colonization began.

### Why is it in the middle of the month?

Several countries celebrate their Independence Day during the month of September.

**September 15:**

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <br>El Salvador | <br>Costa Rica | <br>Guatemala |
| <br>Honduras   | <br>Nicaragua  |  |

**September 16:**  Mexico

**September 18:**  Chile