

“Casa Extendida”–Fostering a sense of community for Latin American international students at Princeton

1) Project Overview

Cultural adjustment to a new country can be a challenging journey, particularly for international students facing multiple unfamiliar environments. Research indicates that Latin American international students, in particular, experience higher levels of psychological distress compared to their peers. This could be attributed to cultural values that prioritize family and community, as well as the relatively lower representation of Latin American students in universities.

Recognizing the growing importance of mental health and well-being on college campuses, our project aims to explore and understand the unique experiences of Latin American international students, with a focus on facilitating effective support systems and building a sense of community to aid in their successful adjustment.

Social Mission:

Our mission is to foster a vibrant and inclusive campus community for Latin American international students to provide them with a sense of familiarity and cultural appreciation and consequently, promote their mental wellness.

Vision:

Our vision is to build an enriching experience for international students to foster a sense of familiarity and appreciation for their respective cultures. We envision that every international student has a space on campus where they feel a connection to their heritage. This cultural appreciation intends to provide students with a reminder of home while promoting diversity and cross-cultural understanding on campus.

2) Project Objectives & Goals

The central objective is to create and maintain a community that provides international students with a sense of familiarity and belonging. Our overarching goals are:

- To promote the understanding and celebration of Latin American cultures, providing a sense of home and appreciation.
- To stimulate intracultural connections among Latinos on campus to form a tight-knit community.
- To develop safe spaces and support strategies personalized to the Latin American student experience, advocating for their wellbeing and needs.

3) Research Insights

- This project is informed by insights gathered from in-depth interviews to gain a better understanding of Latin American values, the experiences of international students on campus, and the mental health and wellness of Princeton students.
- Struggles of International Students: As confirmed by international students and counselors, international students face the same set of challenges consisting of language barriers, changes in educational system, homesickness, and cultural differences. In addition, all international students have been removed from their known community and are less likely to see or have family nearby. While all students have a susceptibility to anxiety or depression, international students have additional stressors that make them susceptible to poor mental health or wellness.
- Value of Community: Latin Americans value the acceptance and support that comes with community. Based on conversations with Latin American students, there is a cohesive idea of community. It consists of a group of people who do not judge each other and instead, support each other and want to see each other succeed. Many described their idea of community as a “second family” or “home away from home.”
- Understanding of American Culture: Some international students and Latinos on campus view American culture as individualistic. Some have described difficulty having meaningful conversations or creating deeper connections with Americans. The perception of Americans is critical to how international students choose to create relationships or to socially integrate in a new environment.

- **Latin American Culture & Values:** Research suggests that most, if not all, Latin American cultures value family, sympathy, and interpersonal skills. Known as “familismo,” Latin Americans value being active and involved in their immediate and extended family. In addition to that, Latinos find it important to have smooth social relationships and maintain politeness. Latinos also prefer to build personal relationships with others based on a strong sense of trust, cooperation, mutual help-giving, and inclusion.

4) Target Audience & Stakeholders

The primary focus is on Latin American international students, a group who is specifically vulnerable to poor mental wellness. However, we also hope to engage with Latin American students and faculty, as well as other international students via our project. It is crucial to have support from parents, mental health specialists, and community leaders both on and off Princeton’s campus.

5) Scope of Work

In the upcoming year, our team will focus on:

- **Community Engagement:** Engage international students and Latino students in community-building activities and events to incentivize connections and friendships.
- **Local Collaborations:** Foster relationships and partnerships between University and local Latino communities to allow students to engage and contribute to local culture and community.
- **Online Platforms & Forums:** Create and maintain online platforms to connect international students and give them the opportunity to communicate, share experiences, and seek advice from one another.
- **Cultural Showcases:** Organize and host cultural events to highlight different Latino heritages and traditions. Latino students may showcase their identity via dance, music, and food to promote a better understanding of Latin American culture.
- **Inclusivity & Diversity:** Track and ensure that our program reflects diverse perspectives and is representative and inclusive of different cultures.

- Peer Mentoring: Establish mentorship pairings between international students and students with experience, fostering a sense of guidance and friendship.

6) Collaboration & Partnerships

Our collaboration with Princeton University and the Princeton township is integral to the success of the "Breathe Free" project. We recognize the significance of working closely with affinity groups, school administrators, students, and mental health specialists to create a tailored approach that aligns with the unique needs and challenges of Latin American international students.

Collaborating with Affinity Groups: It is critical to build a strong partnership with affinity groups who are already working towards uplifting a variety of cultural communities. We will work hand-in-hand with groups like PLASA (Princeton Latin American Student Association) to engage students in programs that uplift their heritage.

Engaging Administration: Working closely with administration and ODUS facilitates the support and approval of Casa Extendida programs and/or initiatives. We will maintain consistent communication on our project's progress and will ensure that the University's goals align with our own.

Empowering Student Participants & Leaders: As the primary beneficiary and stakeholder of our project, students shape the development of this project. We will work closely with Latin American students and international students to continue gathering insights and guide our project in the right direction.

Mental Health Specialists as Links: It is mutually beneficial to create a referral system with counseling services on campus. We hope to introduce and guide students to Princeton's Counseling and Psychological Services, if fitting, and we hope they can refer students to our project if they desire community and connections.

7) Measurement of Impact

To keep track of our progress towards our social mission and measure the changes we wish to see, we will consistently check in with students and participants. Our impact can be measured in the following ways:

- **Achieving a Sense of Belonging:** Using tools like the Social Connectedness Scale and the Sense of Belonging instrument, we will track students' adjustment to the Princeton environment. By building close community connections, students will feel they have the support to transition to the Princeton environment.
- **Promoting Mental Wellness:** Mental wellness comes from a combination of life satisfaction, engagement in activities, positive relationships, and being respected by others, among other factors. The Flourishing scale and General Well-being schedule, which measures one's personal state of wellbeing, will allow us to track any changes or fluctuations in the mental health of our participants.
- **Success of Community-Building:** We will keep an open-mind on the ways in which our project can expand by communicating with our stakeholders. Via coffee chats and feedback forms, we will consider the success of our community-building efforts and the guidance of our participants.

8) Constraints & Assumptions

Constraints:

- **Time Constraints:** Since our project development is limited to a two-semester period, we must plan and think ahead. With good time management and organizational skills, our team will be able to work efficiently despite the time constraint.
- **Budgetary Limitations:** Our project will operate under the budget given to us by partnerships with different University groups. With this constraint in mind, we must form priorities for our funding and continue to develop partnerships with different stakeholders to ensure that funding continues.
- **Stakeholder Interest:** Since our stakeholders may also have budgetary constraints and may have priorities that differ from our mission, it is important to keep stakeholders

invested in our project and remind them of the significance of our project. In addition, having a variety of stakeholders will allow our project to motivate their support in different ways.

Assumptions:

- Cultural Values: We assume that the three cultural values we've identified, familismo, simpatia, and personalismo, resonate with most or all Latin American cultures. We also assume that the value system of Latin American international students aligns with their respective cultures.
- Generalizing Experiences: We assume that the population we are focusing on has similar experiences in their transition to a new environment and that they share the same struggles and root causes behind those struggles.
- Community Sustainability: We assume that the project will result in long term engagement and that the impact will extend beyond the initial timeline.
- Program Effectiveness: We assume that reinforcing a community for Latin Americans will impact their mental wellness and aid an international students' homesickness.
- University Support: We assume that the university will financially and operationally support and be receptive to our programs.
- Interest from Stakeholders: We assume that our stakeholders will be interested and engaged in our project's initiatives. We also assume that our stakeholders will remain interested in supporting our project over a long period of time.

9) Ethical and Sustainable Considerations

In developing the Casa Extendida project, we prioritize the confidentiality and privacy of our participants. We understand and consider the sensitive nature of culture and respect diverse backgrounds and experiences. On that note, we want to ensure that our project will include and represent all Latin American students who choose to participate. We will be transparent about our goals and intentions with our stakeholders as we work towards building a greater sense of community for international students.

10) Timeline & Milestones

The project will be developed over the fall and spring semesters. During the fall semester, we will focus on conceptualization, building partnerships, and prototyping. The spring semester will be dedicated to the implementation and evaluation of our initiatives.

11) Call to Action

Join us in creating a more supportive and inclusive campus environment for Latin American international students. Together, we can bridge the gap in mental health support, celebrate diversity, and empower students to thrive during their transformative college experience.