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It Has Taken Me Years to Understand What it Means to be Latino

By **Fernando Rivera**
UCF Forum columnist

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When I was growing up in Puerto Rico, the term Latino did not make much sense to me. Back then, I was *me*, a kid from Barceloneta (in northern Puerto Rico) who went to Catholic school and loved to play baseball.

Outside of a few childhood trips to Disney World, I had never spent significant time away from the island. It was not until my years as an undergraduate student at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayaguez that I had my first exposure to the term Latino.

The summer of my junior year in 1995, I participated in an undergraduate research experience sponsored by the National Science Foundation and hosted at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For the first time in my life I had to identify with a group, to pick a side.

The popular imagination in Puerto Rico leads you to believe that, as a U.S. citizen, when you come to the mainland you should be perceived as an American. As I strolled the hallways of UNL, that was far from the truth. People asked me where I was from and when I responded Puerto Rico, some did not quite know how to react to it. "Is that close to Mexico?" was one actual response. "Oh, so you are Latino, right?"

For the first time my identity was in question. It was clear to me that something quite magical happened as soon as I stepped onto the mainland. My evolution towards "Latinoness" began.

After obtaining my undergraduate degree in Puerto Rico, I went back to Nebraska to do my graduate studies. My journey on becoming Latino continued.

I clearly remembered sitting in a public-health course having a discussion of health care services around the world and the professor turned to me and asked: "Fernando, can you tell us about health care in Mexico?"

I said, "No, but I can tell you about Puerto Rico!" The professor apologized and I did not make a big deal about it, but it was clear that the perception of my identity had changed.

I started to understand that old Thomas theorem in sociology: If perceptions are defined as real, they are real in their consequences.

Like or not, I was becoming Latino.

It has taken years for me to come to grasp with the term, its definition and what it entails. I now understand the usefulness of the term and how it can be conveyed to address the issues and struggles of a collection of people from different Latin American and Spanish Caribbean countries. How it provides a space for generations to have a term that captures their complicated reality of being American, but also part of another cultural and social heritage. How it can provide a platform for collective action and change.

At the same time, I understand its shortcomings and how it can mask subgroup differences in important societal outcomes such as education, health and others. I see how it can transform traditional cultures into something not quite understandable outside of the U.S. context.

My identity as Puerto Rican remains strong, but that identity has become stronger as a member of the Latino community. Being Latino has allowed me to work with different groups in the community and it has opened doors to numerous opportunities, such as serving as council member and advisory board member for the American Sociological Association's Latina/o Sociology Section and the Minority Fellowship Program.

It took a while, but my journey to “become” Latino has allowed me to understand how differences can unite and how important are labels and perceptions in our everyday lives.

Spanish, Latino, Hispanic, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and other labels bestowed upon me are part of my trajectory. As Latino, I embrace them all and I am glad that I can proudly say that I have become Latino in the United States of America.

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