THE RIO GRANDE has long served as the dividing line between the countries of the United States and Mexico. Yet this small river, less than a mile wide, earns its "grand" title by the separation it has caused a group of people that share the same heritage and origin. The Latin cultures that exist on both sides of the El Paso/Juárez border region have developed a noticeably different flavor from one another. Deriving from the same tradition, the people from this region often view each other as strangers living in the same land.

CULTURE CLASH

Nowhere does the juxtaposition of these two cultures meet—and sometimes clash—better than at the University of Texas at El Paso. The university sits on one of the largest international borders in the world, and boasts one of the largest minority/majority Latin student populations in the country. According to the university 2005-2006 Fact Book, published by the Center for Institutional Evaluation, Research and Planning, UTEP claims a 72 percent Hispanic self-identified student population, as well as nearly 1,700 students from México.

With such a large minority population, an outsider observer may think there would be a constant celebration of everything Latin, but to students who have lived in this area for some time, things are not always as they seem. Issues of language, dress and distribution of wealth, along with the ever-popular issue of immigration, have all contributed to a culture that separates the United States and México, even on campus.

According to Dr. Josiah Heyman, chair of the sociology and anthropology department, there have always been tensions that exist along borders throughout the world. Heyman says the tension among students exists at UTEP because of socio-economic reasons. Most Hispanic students perceive Mexicans as wealthy and because of social mores that exist on both sides of the border, students have to renegotiate perceptions when confronted with a person that may look the same, but has different ideas of self-identity.

Heyman explains that in Mexico, social layers are very defined and dictate social customs. People at the upper echelons of society are supposed to display their wealth through dress and behavior. This comes into conflict when confronted with fellow Latinos, who have adopted a more egalitarian point of view found in American culture.

Sociologist Dr. Pablo Vila, a former UTEP faculty member, currently teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pa., and studied border cultural phenomenon both here and in South America. Vila claimed that one way people describe themselves is by contrasting how they describe others. For example, part of the way Mexicans view themselves is by what they are not, specifically American. Adopting American culture and customs would be a betrayal of one's nationalistic identity, and the reverse is true with Americans.

When members of the same supposed culture come into contact, they meet reflecting their own national identity that includes customs and views of the world. Additionally, Hispanic Americans, especially those who are multigenerational, have inner turmoil when defining Hispanic culture. Vila argues that they tend to hold on to a past utopian idea of Mexican culture and value the old-world customs of family and tradition, but regard the current life of Mexico as backward and poor, falling into a discrepancy.

This is the case for Christopher Sanchez, a senior studying mechanical engineering. The fourth-generation to be born in the United States, Chris was always ashamed of his Mexican ancestry. He found it annoying when people assumed certain aspects of his background that weren't necessarily true. Raised by parents who were both professionals, one of whom is white, Chris was raised in middle-class American society and never spoke Spanish in the home. The regular question of "¿Qué hablas?" (What language do you speak?) from native Spanish speakers has been a constant source of frustration. Since coming to UTEP, he has recognized the need to connect to his roots, and he made efforts to get to know more about what it means to be Mexican-American, and is learning Spanish.

While Giselle Aguilar, a junior civil engineering student, would never call her home country of Mexico backward, she does recognize differences in Mexican and American cultures. She says Mexican culture is more conservative than the American way of life, but she finds Mexicans have much more fun all around. "We're funny. We're the type of people that tell a lot of jokes. We're not serious as Americans," says Giselle. She also explains that in Mexico, race is not as big of an issue as it is in the United States. "We don't worry about being politically correct or about offending people because of their race." She says the social-economic stratum is what separates people in Mexico much more than skin color.

Lizeth Vasquez, a graduate student studying public administration, knows what it's like on both sides of the border. Born in El Paso and raised in Juárez, she sees herself as an embodiment of the border region and a true Mexican-American. "My mom came over just to have me. She wanted me to be born here in the U.S. to have citizen rights." Lizeth says. Although she recognizes the dividing lines between the
rich and poor in Mexico and the racial lines that divide Americans, she sees Mexican and Hispanic cultures as one in the same. When asked, she finds it hard to find distinctions between the two cultures on the border.

Steven Martinez, senior microbiology student, somewhat agrees. Although he makes a clear distinction between the United States and Mexico, he argues that Juárez is not a true representation of Mexican culture because of its proximity to the United States. "Things are so different down there," he says, referring to a trip he took with a friend to the city of Chihuahua.

Steven is not alone in his views. Attitudes toward students coming from the interior of Mexico are quite different. Students from as far away as Chiapas are viewed more favorably than the same internationally designated students from Juárez. Mexican students who do not commute over the bridge daily are viewed as harder working and more academic in nature. These students tend to be seen as more respectful and more passionate than their border-residing counterparts.

THE LANGUAGE

Differing views of Mexico don't stop at Juárez. Division between the two cultures also has translated into stereotypes and terminology used to separate the two sides of the border. Hispanics in the United States have come up with several words to describe Mexicans. Few, if any, are flattering. "Fronchis" is a word used to describe any person from the border region of Mexico. The name comes from the license plates of cars registered in Juárez. "Fronchis" is a shortened term for Frontera Chihuahua (the border of the state of Chihuahua).

A term like "Fresa" (strawberry) is used to describe a particular stereotype of a Mexican woman, but sweetness is no way implied when used by U.S.-born Hispanics. Usually young ladies who fit a certain look are given this label. The common "fresa" look is a more European mode of fashion, stylish hairdo, and make-up that women in the United States usually reserve for evening. The pigeonholing continues as the American opinion that these young women are generally pretentious and rude.

The culture south of the border is also guilty of using terms that help further drive a wedge between two cultures. Typically, U.S.-born Hispanics are not thought of as belonging to either America or Mexico. The Spanish word "pacho" is used as a pejorative to describe Mexicans born and/or raised in the United States. Another term, "mexicano," translates to wetback. Since the vast majority of Mexican immigrants come from very low economic backgrounds, Mexicans use this term to make fun of the image of the new immigrant taking pride in gaining employment in America, even if it's custodial work. "Maincincho" is another term used by Mexicans to describe U.S. Hispanics. The word has historical roots. The Aztec lover of Hemán Cortés, La Malinche, was adopted as a term for anyone who betrays their own race and roots to become something else. Mexicans often feel Hispanics are ashamed of their Mexican ancestry and look down harshly at anyone from their country who adopts too much American culture.

This would help explain the position some Hispanics take when arguing that Mexicans have a general lack of interest in American traditions and an apathetic view toward the United States. "They don't claim U.S. culture at all, but claim all the benefits of an American education," argues Lizeth. Steven contends, "They feel they have the same rights, or should, as U.S. citizens."

The double-sided story continues when discussing the Liberal Arts Building, Dubbed "Little Mexico" by American students and La Bárbara (little wall) by Mexican students, the entrance to the Liberal Arts Building is known as a social landmark and a hotbed of tension between Hispanics and Mexicans. While attempting to navigate through the crowd, Hispanic students have long complained they are made to feel they don't belong. Lizeth has received intimidating glares and a general sense of disregard from her peers. "I speak Spanish fluently, but they assume I don't because I look American." She says. "They all smoke, they all have those walkie-talkie phones and they all use the word guay (Spanish slang for buddy)." Chris agrees that the general perception from Hispanics about Mexicans at the Liberal Arts Building is one of disdain.

On the flip side, Mexican students are quick to point out that most students who hang out in front of the Liberal Arts Building are freshman and don't accurately represent the entire population. Students also point out that there are several reasons that freshman Mexicans hang out in this one spot. One reason is simply to build a network of friends. Coming from an entirely different country, students feel the need to connect with the familiar; the social landmark of Liberal Arts is one way to connect with students like themselves. Another reason is class schedule. Most, if not all, students from Mexico are required to take remedial English classes known as ESL (English as a Second Language).
THE ECONOMIC FACTS

One perception that persists is the opinion that all students from Mexico come from affluent families. Heyman gives credence to this argument stating that the average Mexican does not have a border-crossing card and very few Mexicans are fortunate enough to receive a college education or the chance to earn their degree in a different country. Daniel Fuentes, a junior economics student, admits he is part of the privileged few able to receive an education in the United States. "We are part of the elite since less than 1 percent of the population go to university," he says. Although he is grateful to be among the few in his country to receive the opportunity, he argues that not everyone, including himself, is part of the affluent class in Mexico. He refers to a friend who is forced to hike to school from Juárez because neither he nor his family owns a car. Daniel also explains he is only able to attend UTEP because of several different financial breaks. Enrolled in the PASE program, he receives a scholarship and works part-time. His parents offer what financial assistance they can to cover the rest of his expenses.

PASE (Programa de Asistencia Estudiantil-Program of Student Aid) was approved in 1987 by the Texas Legislature and assists Mexican students by allowing them to pay in-state tuition if they prove financial need. Nick Zweig, director of the Office of International Programs, says that even with programs like PASE, the amount of Mexican students able to receive an American education is limited. "Mexicans are not eligible for financial aid and with the discrepancy of wages in Mexico, it's actually harder for the average Mexican to receive a college education," he says. To qualify for PASE, students must fit between two categories: they must show they would be able to pay for college, but not if they had to pay out-of-state tuition. Zweig explains that the roughly 1,500 Mexican students enrolled in PASE must still pay semester-by-semester, and have very limited working opportunities on and off campus.

A COMPLEX REALITY

With the barrage of opinions, stereotypes and misperceptions between these two factions, one may think that Mexicans and Hispanics never interact. The truth is quite different. Students on both sides of the border do befriend one another and have collaborated in common goals. Lizeth remembers the mass walkouts that overcame the city in 2006 during the immigration debate over House Bill HR4437, when both Chicano activist student groups like MeCHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlán) and MexSA (Mexican Student Association) marched side-by-side in protest of the proposed bill.

Other students are finding benefits in making friends with students from across the border as well. Chris says he is learning new aspects of El Paso's sister city from his new friends from Juárez. Before, the only thing he knew about was the strip of bars frequented by American high school students. Chris further adds that due to the volume of Mexican students enrolled in the engineering program, he can empathize what it must feel like to be a minority. "In study groups, I'm often the only guy who doesn't speak Spanish."

The river that divides the El Paso/Juárez border is more than a small waterway cutting through a large metropolis; it is a visual barrier that has separated a people who share many common values, traditions, beliefs and pride for their heritage. The two Latin cultures that have developed along the banks of the river reflect both the good and the bad of both countries. Heyman explains that stereotypes "take some realities and make them the entire truth, which of course is not." He says reality is more complex that one or two simple descriptions of a people. The tensions that have arisen between Hispanics and Mexicans often develop out of a snapshot of the culture and neglect a holistic approach. Heyman explains, "To stereotype captures some realities, but also misses something greater."

EN BREVE

A pesar de que la distancia que nos divide es muy corta y de tener las mismas raíces la separación entre mexicanos y mexicanos en esta comunidad es muy notoria. La Universidad de Texas en El Paso es uno de los sitios que día a día reúne a los estudiantes de Cd. Juárez y El Paso y es aquí mismo donde encontramos tan notoria separación. Términos como “fronchi”, “fresa”, “pocho” y “malignista” se han creado a través de los años, para de alguna manera describir dichas diferencias.

Según el Dr. Josiah Heyman, director del departamento de sociología en UTEP, muchas de estas diferencias se derivan de razones socioeconómicas, ya que en México a diferencia de los Estados Unidos, las clases sociales están muy marcadas.

Christopher Sánchez, quien a pesar de formar parte de la cuarta generación de su familia que nace en Estados Unidos, sigue conservando rasgos físicos de sus ancestros mexicanos. A Chris le resulta frustrante cuando compañeros de clase le preguntan que por qué no habla español. Jamás ha hablado español en su casa y a pesar de que soñaba avergonzarse de sus raíces, el convivir con estudiantes mexicanos en UTEP le ha hecho entender más de su cultura.