

## What Might the Economic Crisis Mean for Latin American and Latino/a Studies?

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The grim and seemingly worsening economic picture has certainly stunned the faculty on my campus, a small, elite liberal arts college, not far from jittery New York City. The first effects on the Vassar College faculty came through the announcement of adjunct and short-term non-tenure track job cuts. This produced an outcry from the departments and programs most dependent upon them, which did not include the Program in Latin American and Latino/a Studies (LALS).

While we anticipate more cuts to come, the immediate effects of the crisis on LALS programming have been minor. We have no faculty appointments of our own and depend primarily on the good will of tenure track and tenured faculty in the traditional disciplines to represent our multidisciplinarity, to teach our courses (which as LALS stand-alone courses are minimal in number), and to provide a collegial epistemic community. LALS represents a kind of haven away from the confines of disciplinary departments. Through LALS we share our work, sponsor faculty and student conversations and public events, and in recent years, we have been reconceptualizing our program to incorporate Latino/a Studies not simply as an add-on, but as a space that mirrors both profound and important shifts in the academy as well as in our community and the world. For retooling, rethinking the field, we have relied heavily upon early career tenure track faculty.

This all sounds pretty comfortable and parlor-like compared to the very real losses and precariousness outside our college gates, and it is clear that so far Vassar staff and administrators are feeling the cuts in greater numbers than our faculty. Yet there are signs that like programs and departments in campuses across the country, LALS is vulnerable. Despite how obvious it is to us

that scholarship and teaching from a LALS lens are central to our institution's claimed mission, institutionally we are a weak link, as we have no endowment, few student majors, and a tiny budget. We are becoming defensive, readying ourselves to assert that maintaining the program costs the college very little—not a great leg to stand on.

Based on conversations with directors and colleagues at other institutions, including both public and private research universities, a shared looming concern is the potential for a disjuncture between our stated missions on the one hand, and the actual cuts that will affect the (realized and as yet unrealized) globality and diversity of our faculty, students, scholarship and curriculum, on the other. These days most university institutions have mission statements that include language similar to Vassar's, including (these taken from Vassar's first, second, fourth, and final of seven stated goals, respectively): "To develop a well-qualified, diverse student body which, in the aggregate, reflects cultural pluralism, and to foster in those students a respect for difference and a commitment to common purposes." "[T]hrough curricular offerings to promote gender and racial equality and a global perspective." "To maintain and support a distinguished and diverse faculty." And finally, "To continue to be a significant source of national and international leadership, producing graduates who will be distinguished both in their professional careers and in service to their communities and the world." While the mission represents a twenty-first century outlook (though is a bit too missionary in the end), most will agree that the mission requires the expertise of faculty who are newer to the academy and an admissions policy that includes generous financial aid.

Edna Acosta-Belén is the Director of the Center for Latino, Latin American, and

Caribbean Studies (CELAC) and a former Chair of the Department of Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies at SUNY-Albany, a department with eight core faculty, six additional faculty with joint appointments, and several affiliated faculty. As a member of a strong department with a history of securing outside grants, including FLAS funding, Acosta-Belén anticipates some level of budget reductions in replacing faculty or in graduate assistantships, since reductions are affecting all university units. Acosta-Belén emphasizes that the challenge will be to protect interdisciplinary university programs that "emerged in more recent decades from specific social struggles and curriculum transformation processes... programs that initially emerged because of political pressures to have more inclusive curricula, workforces, and student bodies, such as U.S. Latino Studies, Africana Studies, or women's/gender studies, as well as older area studies programs." In other words, we must neither tolerate nor afford reductions that shrink from the imperatives of a global agenda that recognizes the structural realities of our societies and economies rather than the insularities on our campuses that too many establishments tend to reproduce.

For Department of Education Title VI National Resource Centers, Latin American area studies institutes enjoy some measure of assurance, though perennially the grantees worry that federal education restructuring might end area studies funding. While directors of Title VI area studies centers lament the boundaries and exclusions that continue to be Cold War-defined, Title VI funding grants institutional authority. In any case, budget cutbacks in both external funding and internal institutional support threaten cross-regional scholarly exchange, fieldwork research, and study away and abroad. While many Latin America programs and institutes remain vibrant,

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universities are reducing their support, even by increasing the fringe line items on program grants. Pablo Piccato, director of the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) at Columbia University, notes that while in recent years Latin America and Latino/a scholarship has grown across the campus, Columbia graduate students and newly minted PhDs have been hit hard by faculty searches around the country that have been postponed.

The overall picture suggests a dampening on scholarship broadly, at a time when multidisciplinary research on the local-global nexus may be more important than ever. Current debates on the economic crisis and migration on the U.S.-Mexico border, for example, are bringing together policy analysts, advocates, and scholars from several disciplines to assess such varied and related issues as: the effects of arms flows from and drugs to the United States on security broadly conceptualized on both sides of the border; the quite dramatic impact of U.S. crackdowns and deportations on family breakups according to citizenship status; the question of whether the Mexican economic crisis in relation to the U.S. economic crisis, coupled with U.S. crackdowns, is triggering an actual de-migration from Mexico to the United States. These arenas of Mexico-U.S. scholarship represent a small fraction of the ways that urgent concerns necessarily contribute to reconfiguring area studies as well as disciplinarity.

Such issues also have direct implications for Vassar's home of Poughkeepsie, New York, an economically struggling city of 30,000, where just under half the population is black and latino/Latin American (including a sizeable population from Oaxaca, Mexico). Through research, fieldwork, teaching, and some community organizing in the tradition of a Latino/a Studies genealogy, LALS

faculty and students have taken advantage of Vassar's situatedness. In addition, in line with SUNY and New York state legislation, as well as that of several other states across the country that grant admission to undocumented students who have been in high school for two-three years or more in the United States, Vassar has adopted an admissions policy that recognizes undocumented student applicants as equal to all other applicants.

This short piece is necessarily premature and speculative, as the impact of the economic crisis on our colleges and universities remains difficult to assess. At this very moment it is virtually impossible to know how many students who have been accepted will indeed enroll next year, as well as what levels of financial need will be required to meet Vassar's policy of need-blind admissions. Vassar's endowment represents approximately one-third of the budget, while tuition revenues represent approximately another half. What is clear is that debates have become tense regarding core curriculum, faculty development funding, and what, exactly, is necessary to sustain and build on a commitment to multidisciplinary scholarship and training. ■