Latin American Studies and the Financial Crisis

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We are now becoming aware of the effects of the current financial crisis on U.S. universities, many of which will challenge Latin American Studies programs much as they do other areas of teaching and research. Universities have seen endowments and state funding allotments decline, while students face increasing financial aid needs. The immediate consequences of the crisis for faculty and instructional programs are apparent: hiring freezes, salary cuts, reduction of non-tenure track personnel, and declines in professional development and operating funds. While faculty and students in all fields will feel these pressures, Latin American Studies programs and Latin Americanist scholars will face specific challenges related to the nature of our work and our institutional contexts, as I detail below. I focus on the U.S. and Latin American settings I know best; other contributors to this section can address other kinds of institutional context.

Latin American Studies programs (and other area studies fields) are today in a particularly vulnerable position. As is well known, area studies emerged as a major presence on American campuses in the late 1950s as part of the U.S. foreign policy response to the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite. This policy's most enduring legacy was the creation of the U.S. Dept. of Education Title VI National Resource Center/Foreign Language and Area Studies program that funds instructional and outreach activities as well as the study of less commonly taught languages (principally, in the case of Latin American Studies, Portuguese and indigenous languages). Even before the current crisis (beginning about a decade or so ago), competition for these awards increased between institutions, and some universities that had received funding during several cycles lost out to newcomers. While the Obama administration's proposed budget has pledged to increase education funding, it is unlikely that Congress will pass the budget in its current form, and there is no guarantee that funding will be steered toward higher education programs like Title VI. Furthermore, with tax revenues declining as a consequence of increased unemployment, home foreclosures, and commercial bankruptcies, it is reasonable to expect that Title VI funds will decline while competition for funding grows. Furthermore, because universities must commit matching funds to compete for Title VI grants, institutions in dire financial straits will be eliminated because they are unable to "pony up" these funds. In concrete terms, this likely reduction in funds will make it more difficult for LAS programs to attract new graduate students with FLAS grants, provide K-12 teachers with assistance incorporating Latin America-related materials into curricula, and to provide students, faculty, and community members with a rich array of invited speakers on Latin American topics.

Similarly, PhD students and faculty rely on traditional Fulbright and Fulbright-Hayes funds to carry out field research in the region. Since these two programs also rely on public funding, we can expect either the value of stipends or the number of awards to decline, thus impacting the quantity and quality of new research on Latin America. (Faculty who finance shorter trips to the region through university-based funds will likely feel the pinch as well.) Fulbright also funds Latin American students to complete MA or PhD degrees at U.S. institutions. These grants will likely be curtailed as well, making it more difficult for Latin American scholars to pursue graduate degrees abroad and then apply their knowledge to teaching, research, or employment in the public or non-profit sectors in their countries of origin.

Institutions and individual scholars in the United States and Latin America also look to private foundations for the funding of research, scholarly exchanges, and other collaborations. Because foundations such as Ford, Mellon, SSRC, Guggenheim and Tinker that have traditionally funded research, teaching, and scholarly exchanges on Latin America draw on endowments that are invested on the stock market, these organizations are likely to face steep reductions in staff and available grants. In addition to reducing the possibilities for individual research in or on Latin America, these cuts will likely have negative effects on North-South scholarly collaborations made possible through specialized conferences, workshops, exchanges and team-based research projects, such as those funded by SSRC or Mellon and/or organized by several U.S.-based Latin American Studies programs.

However, the private and public funding that is available is likely to be directed toward emerging topics and concerns in the region. Poverty and inequality have been long-term concerns in the field, particularly since Latin America is the most unequal region in the world in terms of incomes. Agencies are likely to fund research focused on growing unemployment, food and health insecurity, the social and economic effects of declining migrant remittances from the United States and the return of many migrants to Latin America, crime and violence resulting from economic insecurity, and the potentially explosive political effects of the crisis on Latin America. If the consequences of the Great Depression are any indication of what we the current crisis portends, we are likely to see significant social and political upheaval in the region.

In addition to these effects of the crisis that reflect purely economic phenomena, we should also consider the institutional

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position of Latin American Studies both in terms of the political weight of LAS programs in relation to other departments as well as the system of incentives within disciplines. Impressions based on my experience teaching in the Latin American Studies program at the University of Arizona and directing the LAS program at Grand Valley State University is that area studies programs often (though not always) need to compete for resources with departments whose members question the value of interdisciplinary teaching and research, and face administrations that may not understand the importance of area studies and international inquiry. I suspect that Latin American Studies programs will now be placed even more on the defensive as administrators and students feel pressure to pursue or support the most "pragmatic" fields of study—those with clear career paths. In this context, while a BA in Spanish might make sense for an individual who seeks a career in K-12 teaching, a major, minor, or MA in Latin American Studies might be harder to justify because it has less institutionalized links to the labor market. Furthermore, financially strapped students will likely be unable to study abroad in Latin America, traditionally a key draw of many Latin American Studies programs. Thus, LAS programs will need to struggle even harder than in the past for faculty positions, operating funds, and professional development funds, and to attract students.

In addition to the scramble for scarce resources within universities, more subtle pressures emanating from the disciplines will likely affect individual faculty, and in turn, associations like LASA. Most Latin American Studies scholars received PhDs in traditional disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences, or professional degrees in fields such as law, planning, or medicine. Faced with reductions in professional development funds, faculty that normally attend two or more conferences per year (e.g. a conference in their discipline and the LASA Congress) will likely need to attend only one conference as funds for conference attendance dwindle. Most faculty will opt to attend their discipline's conference because it serves as a means to more palpable professional rewards (publications in more prestigious journals, highly respected awards, and broader employment opportunities) than does attendance at an interdisciplinary conference.

With all of this bad news, is there any hope? What strategies might Latin American Studies programs pursue to continue their important teaching, research, and exchange activities? I suspect that with the Obama administration's commitment to reduce U.S. military activities in Iraq, serious interest in reducing climate change, and tentative political opening toward Cuba, U.S. foreign policy will have a growing focus on Latin America after George W. Bush largely ignored the region during his two administrations. This increased focus might lead congressional leaders to exempt Title VI and Fulbright programs from the most severe cuts, and could potentially open avenues for Latin Americanist scholars to produce and disseminate policy-relevant research. Furthermore, the importance of the "Latino vote" to Obama´s victory may lead to more significant public engagement with and funding directed toward programs serving Latinos in the United States and educating other members of the population about this group. Finally, students' path toward vocational training is a further incentive for LAS programs to expand their incipient moves toward collaboration with professional programs such as nursing, education, social work, law, and journalism.

Keeping these possible changes in mind, faculty and university administrations might explore how they can best take advantage of existing funding for teaching and research on Latinos and Latin America or advocate for the creation of new ones. A planned commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of Title VI this year at Michigan State University seems a most opportune moment to impress upon government employees and lawmakers the continuing importance of Latin American Studies to U.S. higher education and policy communities.

Across the Rio Grande, Latin American universities and governments have become increasingly interested in enhancing connections with their U.S. counterparts. First, Latin American universities have sought to improve their international stature and the research capabilities of their faculty by increasing the number of individuals with PhDs they employ, particularly those who earned their degrees abroad. In turn, increasing numbers of Latin Americans are pursuing PhDs in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Australia with the support of government or international funds. While Fulbright funding will likely become scarce, Latin American governments may endeavor to replace some of these funds because of the economic and technological returns of a highly educated workforce. Second, Latin American universities are increasingly turning to U.S. and European models of curriculum development, accreditation, and institutional architecture. Finally, Latin American scholars and governments will make forceful efforts to influence U.S. and global policy toward the region as the effects of the crisis are felt in the region. Thus, we can expect continued interaction between U.S. and Latin American scholars as Latin American universities position themselves on the international stage. ■