

Latin American Studies Programs in the Twenty-First Century U.S. University

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Latin American Studies (LAS) programs at U.S. universities fulfill a variety of functions oriented both toward their own campuses and to broader publics. The relative emphasis placed on research, teaching and off-campus outreach varies from one institution to another, but LAS programs have a valuable role to play in each of these three domains. This brief essay highlights unique contributions that LAS programs have to offer, while noting some of the principal constraints they encounter, and assets they provide, in the twenty-first-century university. One cannot escape the conclusion that these are relatively difficult times for such programs, if for no other reason than because we live in a context in which competition is keen for scarce and often declining resources. Nonetheless, there is considerable space for innovation, and I believe moreover that there are unprecedented opportunities. LAS programs are well situated to engage the communities that surround them and to play a trailblazing role in the efforts of U.S. universities to become more international in focus and action.

As has been the case since their dramatic expansion during the post WW-II and particularly post-Sputnik eras, a core mandate of LAS programs in the United States is to train the next generation of experts, imbuing in their students a deep knowledge of language and culture as well as the particularities of social, political and economic dynamics in the region. Whether through coordination of certificate and degree programs or simply by ensuring availability of a rich menu of courses across disciplines, provision of cross-disciplinary training has been and will remain central to our mission. This is especially the case for the couple dozen or so of the larger programs that benefit from U.S. Department of Education Title VI funding for Latin American Studies, but it applies as well to

the countless smaller programs that operate across universities and colleges of different sizes and rankings. Many LAS programs also provide resources to enable students to gain first-hand exposure to Latin America and the Caribbean through field research, study abroad programs and exchanges. All of these instances of support for training are examples of highly worthwhile functions of area studies programs in contemporary universities. Where the necessary funding streams can be sustained, all LAS programs should do their utmost to preserve these important areas of work.

Outreach initiatives of many sorts are among the most visible activities undertaken by LAS programs across the country. In most universities these programs encompass film and lecture series, sponsorship of cultural events relating to Latin America, and efforts to connect to community organizations whose members share an interest in the region. For my own university as well as other institutions where Latino Studies is included as a core element of our mandate, fostering connections to Latino populations in the community is an important priority. In the Title VI universities, and occasionally elsewhere, LAS programs frequently partner with schools of education to provide curricular materials and training to secondary school teachers wishing to incorporate Latin America-related themes into their classrooms. Given the degree to which today's universities are called upon to demonstrate their relevance to stakeholders throughout society, these partnerships are important, as are those that endeavor to forge linkages with the private sector and with public officials with interests in the region. Our ability to work ever more productively with constituencies beyond the university will help to enhance the legitimacy of the scholarly enterprise among sometimes skeptical observers outside the walls of academe.

If training and outreach have long been central to Latin American Studies, and are likely to remain so, LAS and other regionally defined programs typically have been less directly involved in the design and facilitation of scholarly research, even while sometimes providing resources for faculty and graduate student travel to conduct fieldwork. Indeed, in most universities, faculty secure support for their research individually or under auspices of departments or thematically defined interdisciplinary institutes, and the funding for these efforts is channeled into the university accordingly. Yet regionally defined units can be ideal venues for linking currents of expertise in cohesive research groups, typically united by a thematic focus and drawing on both disciplinary and contextual expertise. By catalyzing such collaborative research and by taking a leadership role in securing resources for such initiatives, LAS programs can enrich intellectual life within their units, boost the research profile of their universities, and develop knowledge that can be packaged in ways that will engage the off-campus communities with which they develop relationships. In so doing, they can also gain credibility for the programs with university administrators eager to augment external funding for research.

Indeed, amidst the financial constraints affecting universities across North America, it seems to me unlikely that area studies programs will receive increased institutional support merely on the basis of their contributions to curricula, however essential these may be. Rather, an emphasis on outreach and research is likely to become increasingly imperative. At American University (AU) in Washington DC, where I work, the administration chose last year, despite the country's turbulent economic times, to make significant investments to create the new Center for Latin American

and Latino Studies (CLALS). Inaugurated as a campus-wide center on Jan. 1, 2010, CLALS's mission is in part to work with AU's six schools and colleges to strengthen course offerings related to Latin America—and to the study of Latino populations in the United States—and to provide other educational opportunities for our students both on campus and in Latin America.¹

But whether with regard to Latin America or to Latino populations in the United States, or the intersections between the two, the principal goal of our new center is to facilitate the research of our sixty-five faculty affiliates and their students, and to engage the campus with stakeholders outside the university in efforts to create and disseminate knowledge in the public interest. For CLALS, as for LAS programs across the country, taking on a direct role in sponsorship of research inevitably will bring with it institutional challenges, particularly since externally funded investigation has traditionally been funneled through departments and schools. Creative mechanisms and a culture of collegiality will need to be developed and sustained in order for this to work smoothly. But I am optimistic, both about our own prospects and about the possibility that our effort can be replicated elsewhere. In the first instance this is simply because the intellectual rewards to conceptualizing and undertaking research in the multi-disciplinary setting offered by a regionally defined unit are substantial, and I believe that these will motivate our faculty to invest considerable time and effort. But two additional factors are worth mentioning.

First, the past decade has witnessed a welcome decline in the battle for legitimacy of area studies scholarship vis-à-vis skeptics in the disciplines, particularly in the social sciences but in the humanities as well. Readers of the *Forum* will recall the debates

of the 1990s, when critics of LAS and other area studies programs questioned the value of in-depth knowledge of the complexities of diverse cultures and societies, preferring instead to privilege the teaching of method and technique and ignore the risk of losing nuanced understandings of the contextual variations that characterize the real world. In my own field of comparative politics, it was not uncommon to encounter the argument that the need for doctoral students to develop competence in advanced statistical techniques outweighed that of gaining exposure to cultural diversity. According to those who held such views, understanding of local specificities would have to be derived from readings of the secondary literature, or, in the most egregious cases, could be ignored altogether in a context where universality was assumed to have replaced contingency in the age of globalization. Fortunately, events in the real world as well as in our disciplines have done away with the enchantment with the simplicities of the post-Cold War, putatively unipolar order, and the intellectual case for area studies is now accepted by all but the most recalcitrant among our colleagues.

Second, part of what drew me to AU was that the university is structured in a way that is unusually conducive to collaboration across traditional departments and faculties. Moreover, unlike most area studies programs, which are located in colleges of arts and sciences, the new center reports directly to the provost and is explicitly charged with building on expertise distributed throughout the university. But even where the traditional organizational chart prevails, I see other universities moving in analogous directions as they actively seek mechanisms to encourage synergies across campus units. In part this reflects the endless and nowadays often frantic quest for cost-saving mechanisms, but I think that there is more to it than that. Leaders of

countless universities across the country, like those at AU, are genuinely committed to finding ways to internationalize their institutional profiles. How best to do so, and what exactly internationalization might entail, is the subject of ongoing discussion on our campus as elsewhere, but regionally focused units undoubtedly have a role to play.

One thing that I believe it ought to entail is the development of ongoing relationships between U.S. universities and their counterparts in Latin America, and in my view LAS programs can be at the forefront of efforts to bring about those partnerships. We can do this through the development of collaborative research programs with scholars based in the region, who frequently are the leading innovators in their fields, and we can do so by re-conceptualizing how we go about providing state-of-the-art graduate training in the twenty-first century.

This last point merits elaboration. There once was a time when the most promising Latin American students would come to the United States for doctoral study, and while this still occurs on occasion, several factors increasingly militate against it. Most notably, the cost has become prohibitive, and faced with the alternative of strengthening graduate programs in the region or paying for individual students to pursue degrees in the North, foundations and other funding sources (including Latin American governments) are opting not to send individual students to complete multi-year training programs in the United States. But beyond that, and crucially for LAS programs and for the internationalization of American universities, the past decade has witnessed a remarkable strengthening of graduate training within many Latin American countries. It is difficult to make the case nowadays that Latin American graduate students should pursue Latin

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America-focused degree in the United States when they can do so for a fraction of the cost at numerous high-quality Brazilian and Mexican universities, or in Bogotá, Buenos Aires or Quito, to cite but a handful of examples.

In that context, if we are looking for a particularly ambitious way to truly internationalize our universities, perhaps we should question the notion that the best graduate programs in Latin American Studies, or for students pursuing Latin America-focused topics in doctoral programs, ought to take place solely under the auspices of U.S. universities. My sense is that the time is ripe for U.S. universities to begin developing joint degree programs with the very best among their counterparts in Latin America. Newly minted Ph.D.s would emerge from such joint programs with exposure to the state-of-the-art work being undertaken in both U.S. and Latin American academic communities, and the disciplines in both North and South would be enriched as a result. By facilitating these sorts of exchanges and joint training programs, the field of Latin American Studies can be at the forefront of a drive to internationalize the disciplines—disciplines that provide the core building blocks for the contemporary American university. In so doing, we can give substance to the rhetorical commitment to internationalizing our universities. As we contemplate the twenty-first century role of Latin American Studies, at my own institution and elsewhere, this is among the major innovations, controversial though it will no doubt be, that I believe merits consideration.

Endnote

¹ Analysis of the relationship between Latin American Studies and Latino Studies is beyond the scope of this brief essay, but several points are worth noting. First, the origins of these two fields are very different, and their trajectories will remain so. Thus, Latin Americanists and Latino specialists should retain their separate identities, even while in some institutions they may be housed under a single academic unit, such as our Center for Latin American and Latino Studies. Second, just as LAS Programs have multiple objectives, encompassing research, teaching and outreach, so too should Latino Studies Programs, regardless of whether they are set up as independent entities or combined with Latin American Studies. Third, while these are in part separate scholarly communities, some sub-sectors of both fields intersect increasingly, around themes that reflect the flows of people, ideas and resources throughout the hemisphere. Indeed, one of the advantages of combining Latin American Studies and Latino Studies in a single unit is that it may maximize opportunities for collaborative work analyzing the complex and fascinating intersections between the two subjects of study. ■