Latin American Studies Then and Now

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The Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University (FIU) was established in 1979, seven years after the creation of the university itself. At the time, the university was relatively small, 10,000 students, and was yet to establish most of its graduate-level programs. LACC was its first area studies center.

Today, with a student body of 40,000, FIU is one of the twenty-five largest universities in the United States. Located in southern Florida, an area with a large Spanish-speaking population, 60 percent of its student body is Hispanic. On its main campus, Helena Ramírez is the Student Government President, William José Vélez, the Senate Speaker and Verónica Guerra the Chief Justice. Official university business is conducted in English, but everyday campus life is largely bilingual. LACC is one of four area studies centers at FIU, but Latin America is present all over campus: in the music, in the food, in the conversations and in the preoccupations.

The period of LACC's founding was a time of great turmoil in Central America, turmoil that reverberated in south Florida. After the Sandinistas overthrew Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and the strength of the Salvadoran left grew, increasing numbers of Nicaraguans and some Salvadorans began settling in Miami. And on a national level, Washington was paying close attention to these events. As we know, Central America would become Ronald Reagan's presidency foreign policy obsession.

With the end of the Cold War, however, area studies centers in U.S. universities began to be questioned from various quarters. Globalization was erasing geographical and cultural particularities; geography did not matter in an age of instant communication and mass air travel. While in the United States sushi and guacamole were rapidly becoming staples of the urban professional diet, much of the rest of the world was wearing jeans and eating Big Macs. These changes, the thinking went, had made the area-studies approach to world problems obsolete.

Despite the support that private foundations such as Mellon and Ford had given to the creation of area studies centers and the grant program created by the defense department in order to encourage area studies, the empirically based approach had never been an easy fit in U.S. universities for at least two reasons. An epistemological reason: The social sciences have long felt a need to build general theories, the more abstract the better. A second, more pedestrian, but probably more important reason: The promotion system at universities predicated on peer-reviewed publications was—and is—discipline-based.

With the exception of Soviet and Eastern Europe Studies, which were lavishly funded for obvious reasons, no other area studies received more funding and more recognition in the United States than Latin American Studies. Not even Vietnam eclipsed Latin America. We might have Fidel Castro to thank for that.

The 1980s are often referred to as Latin America's lost decade, and that is probably the case from an economic point of view. However, it was also the decade of South American transitions to representative democracy, of new constitutions introducing important changes concerning women and indigenous rights, of Contadora, of the Esquipulas peace process, of many important events and new unfolding processes. It was a rather busy time for Latin Americanists. The globalizing years of the 1990s, on the other hand, were years of decline for area studies.

Enter 9/11: Since the terrorist attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon, Middle Eastern and Central Asian Area Studies have been energized and revamped. This has not been the case for Latin American Studies, many of whose practitioners still feel uneasy about the status of the field. The Latin American Studies scholarly community continues to be by far the best-organized area studies grouping in the country and probably in the world. LASA is an incontrovertible proof of that.

So why the malaise? Let me suggest five reasons: to begin with, the old bureaucratic challenges are still there and the academic credentials of area studies are still not fully accepted. A second reason is that there is less funding available for research in area studies and therefore in Latin American Studies. Private foundations that had traditionally, and generously, funded international and area studies have changed their funding priorities.

A third reason is, yes, globalization and the redefinition of regional groupings. There has been a blurring of boundaries between the international and domestic spheres as a result of the deepening integration of the world's economies and of the world's peoples. Fourth, we have seen rapidly expanding demographic integration of the United States with Latin America, particularly with Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, but increasingly with South America as well. This is modifying the contours of the region.

And finally, the fifth reason for the malaise stems from the way the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies funding scholarly work—research, training and education—define the world. I would argue that the most prestigious grant program of all, the National Resource Centers Program, strictly defines its mandate

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in an "us" versus "them" way. Despite references to the increasing interconnectedness of today's world, we all know that Title VI, as it is commonly referred to, does not consider migration, diasporas, heritage speakers, or other similar transnational issue-areas as belonging to (in the words of the program's brochure) "the fields necessary to provide a full understanding of the areas, regions, or countries in which the languages are commonly used."

At close to fifty million, the Hispanic population of the United States is the second-largest Spanish-speaking community in the world, second only to Mexico's and larger than Spain's. Univision, headquartered in Manhattan, is the largest producer of Spanish-language television programs and also one of the most popular networks in the United States among the 18-35 demographic. The electronic version of *El Nuevo Herald*, Miami's Spanish language daily is widely read in Latin America. Alongside Madrid's *El País*, it has the best regional coverage in the world.

Thirty-eight percent of Hispanics in the United States are foreign-born and more than half entered the country after 1990 (63 percent of Mexicans, 66 percent of Salvadorans, and even 21 percent of Cubans.) One in four Salvadorans, one in five Mexicans, and one in ten Cubans live in the United States.

Are they here? Are they there? Those are questions from a bygone era. They are here and they are there. They are everywhere. ■

A Consortium that Works: The Consortium in Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University

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The Consortium in Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and Duke University is a collaborative program of teaching, research, and public outreach. Created more than twenty years ago as a result of a deepening shared interest in Latin America at both universities, the consortium is a partnership between the Institute for the Study of the Americas (ISA) at the UNC-CH and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at Duke. The geographic proximity of the two campuses—less than ten miles apart—greatly encourages and facilitates regular collaboration among faculty, staff, and students. The consortium is committed to the development of the Latin American and Caribbean undergraduate curriculum, the enhancement of the capabilities for graduate student training, support for faculty and student research projects representing all disciplines and professional schools, and the promotion of institutional and public awareness of the importance of Latin America and the Caribbean. The consortium works to fulfill its mission and meet program goals through educational activities, research and training support, collaborative outreach activities and the dissemination of relevant information. It seeks to integrate into a single community, members of the faculty, staff, and students with interests in Latin America, in all fields of knowledge.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm and collegiality among faculty and administrators from both campuses, the consortium was formalized in 1990 with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In the mid-1990s the consortium received subsequent endowment challenge grants from the Mellon Foundation. During those years academic administrators of both universities committed new staff positions and expanded faculty appointments in Latin American studies. In 1990 Carolina and Duke joined together as a consortium program to prepare the first successful Title VI National Resource Center and FLAS Fellowship grant application. Rather than competing with each other, Carolina and Duke combined their formidable resources in library collections and deep faculty and staff assets to offer a joint program in Latin American studies. This tradition of collaboration and cooperation has continued for more than two decades.

The Consortium has maintained the practice of frequent communication between directors and staffs from both campuses. Staff members speak with one another almost daily and meet periodically. The consortium organizes social events, including picnics, pot-luck dinners, and faculty book-launching parties, all of which are designed to enhance a sense of community. There is a commitment to the development of the partnership at all programmatic levels. The continuity of staff members and faculty leadership has contributed to the maintenance of the tradition of collaboration between ISA and CLACS. New students and faculty members are informed of the resources and activities offered on the other campus and are apprised of joint activities and activities unique to each campus. Students from one campus are able to take classes on the other campus. It is not unusual for graduate students from one campus to have faculty representation from the other campus on their committees. Both libraries are open to students and faculty from the other campus.

Among the key activities that support teaching, outreach and research are the following:

Yucatec Maya Language Instruction
The consortium now offers three levels of instruction during the Summer Intensive