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## ABSTRACT

The report highlights issues discussed at a meeting of the International Councils on Higher Education held in Mexico in 1975. The purpose of the meeting was to promote exchange of ideas and experiences among higher education experts from Latin America and the United States. A major portion of the Mexico conference was devoted to an assessment of Latin American area studies programs from the perspective of educators from the United States and eight Latin American nations. Presented as an essay interpreting the principal issues in the position papers, the document discusses three major topics. The first section compares Latin American studies in American universities with similar courses in Latin American institutions. It concludes that recent improvement in centers in Latin America has decreased U.S. domination of the field and encouraged dialogue on common intellectual concerns. Section II focuses on dwindling financial support for U.S. Latin American studies centers which, when combined with relatively low-level funding of research and training in Latin American institutions, may sap the vitality of the professional field. In section III, the role challenge facing U.S. Latin American scholars is discussed and suggestions are made for re-evaluating objectives and establishing cooperative projects between U.S. scholars and their Latin American counterparts. A directory of conference participants and observers is included in the document. (Author/DB)

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## Issues in International Education

The publication of this series of papers reflects the Institute's continuing concern with the critical issues in international education. In recent years this concern has been expressed particularly through the Institute's sponsorship of the International Councils on Higher Education, which bring together chief executives of universities in the U.S. and other regions of the world for examination of topics of shared interest. Essays prepared as subjects for discussion at these conferences will form a portion of the series, which will draw upon other resources as well.

The past two decades have been a period of enormous growth in education throughout the world. As the role of education has increased in dimension, the choices involved in educational decision-making have increased in complexity and in social impact. It is hoped that this series will contribute to the ongoing debate on the issues of international education through examination of alternative viewpoints and through the publication of new information. As international education in our era has broadened its scope beyond traditional activity to include developmental assistance and other concerns, the range of topics covered in the series will reflect the breadth of interest in the field.

Papers in this series are prepared under the direction of the Office of the International Councils on Higher Education.

# Latin American Studies

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## New Roles, New Constraints

### INTRODUCTION

*In March of 1975, a group of university presidents and educational specialists from Latin America and the United States met in Mexico under the auspices of the International Councils on Higher Education (ICHE), a division of the Institute of International Education of New York. The Mexico conference was the seventeenth in an annual series of Inter-American meetings designed to promote a regular exchange of ideas and experiences among leaders in the field of higher education in Latin America and the United States. The Mexico meeting was organized under a grant from the Tinker Foundation of New York with supplemental funding from El Colegio de Mexico and the National Autonomous University of Mexico.*

*A major portion of the Mexico conference was devoted to an assessment of Latin American area studies programs from the perspective of specialists from the United States and Latin America who have been closely associated with some of the leading programs over the past decade. It was the function of the specialists to prepare position papers on this topic which provided the focus for a lively series of discussions in which university presidents from the United States and eight Latin American nations participated. In the following report, we have attempted to highlight the principal issues which emerged from the meeting and to provide a sense of the collective contribution of the participants to an examination of them. It is less a summary record of deliberations than an interpretive essay in which we note some courses of action that might be taken to strengthen this critical field in the years ahead.*

*We have decided against publishing the background and position papers as an appendix to this report, but have suggested that the authors place them in the appropriate scholarly and professional journals. Our essay makes no attempt to cover all of the issues raised in these papers, but we have sought to represent the points of view recorded below as accurately as possible. The responsibility for any errors of omission or commission is ours.*

*James F. Tierney  
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New York, New York  
June, 1976*

## **I. Latin American Studies: A Double Challenge**

**T**he scholar's role in gathering and utilizing knowledge of Latin America is the subject of much current debate. There is a significant—and creative—tension between U.S. Latin Americanists and their counterparts in the social sciences in the rest of the Americas. Both varieties of Latin Americanist face double challenges of role and of constraint in the seventies, but their objective circumstances are different, as are the demands placed upon them by their particular political/social/economic environments.

Latin American studies—as a conceptual field—has existed for many years in the United States. Its growth from small beginnings in the nineteenth century was gradual and incremental. There were relatively limited numbers of scholars with interest in, and hard knowledge about, Latin America. These scholars formed a variety of loose networks, published their research and trained new generations of students with Latin American interests, but “Latin American studies” as a field of investigation retained a more or less informal structure on most campuses through the fifties.

In the sixties, Latin American studies experienced a phase of rapid, heavily-funded institutionalization. According to data contained in the Lambert report<sup>1</sup>, the most comprehensive review of U.S. area studies programs to date, the rate of production of Latin American specialists in the United States increased six-fold during the decade. Part of this increase was a by-product of the vast expansion of U.S. higher education in

<sup>1</sup>Richard D. Lambert, *Language and Area Studies Review*, Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, Monograph 17, October 1973.

general during the period. More financial and human resources were available than ever before, and on many campuses it seemed appropriate to invest some of these burgeoning resources in areas of knowledge that had been relatively neglected before. Part derived from an increased concern with international affairs in recognition of the United States' dominant global position and its expanding roles in trade, business and development in the postwar era.

Much of the impetus for expansion derived from the heavy investment in Latin American training and research of the Federal Government and of the major foundations throughout the decade of the sixties. The U.S. Government's interest in expanding knowledge of the area was in large part a response to the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath. As the Vietnam war and other events of the late sixties and early seventies diverted the Federal Government's attention and funding to other areas of concern, no other major source of money was found to take its place. This falling-off of external funding for area studies centers and programs, along with the severe pressures placed on U.S. higher education by inflation and by a generally stagnant economy, has led to retrenchment and to some re-examination of goals.

As noted above, Latin American studies for much of its history was a slowly-growing field engaging the interest of relatively few scholars. Most Latin American studies programs on U.S. campuses originated in the shared concern with that part of the world of a group of faculty from various departments within individual institutions. However, even such loose

arrangements had clear advantages over the training that could be acquired in Latin America itself by those with regional interests. As a participant in the Mexico City conference noted in a discussion paper:

Latin America offered no alternatives. Differences in the quality of teaching and research, as well as library and computer facilities, were staggering. Even the best Latin American institutions could not compare with secondary North American universities. Not only were personnel, library and computer resources vastly inferior but also there was little interest on the part of local institutions to allocate resources to study other Latin American countries. Thus, one could not study Latin America as such in Latin America . . .<sup>2</sup>

One could study Brazil in Brazil, Mexico in Mexico, and so on, but studies of the region as a whole have been a relatively late development. In a seeming paradox, the Latin American graduate student who wished to pursue Latin American studies had to leave his region in order to learn about it, typically through a graduate program in the United States or Europe. Even within his home discipline, differences in facilities were such that a period of study abroad was indicated as part of the training for the prospective Latin American scholar.

The same writer goes on to note that in recent years the chasm between U.S. and Latin American institutions has narrowed. A number of Latin American institutions have developed into centers of excellence, aided by increased funding and increased emphasis on their critical role in development. Research library resources are still not what they might become in terms of historical holdings and regional scope, but computer facilities have improved substantially.

With few exceptions, the area studies center format as it developed in the United States has not taken hold in Latin America. Instead, Latin Americans have developed their own type of

<sup>2</sup>Glaucio Dillon Soares, discussion paper prepared for 1975 CHEAR Mexico City conference, p. 14.

regional studies centers, which are engaged not so much in the "study of" Latin America as in "study for" Latin America. That is, they are problem-centered research institutions with some training capacity. They apply their resources to the solution of the shared developmental problems of Latin American nations, thus maximizing limited resources of money and manpower.

Latin American universities and research centers now have available to them a critical resource - a large pool of well-trained scholars with proven professional competence. These academics have challenged prevailing theories of Latin America in a broad range of fields, particularly in the social sciences. They are developing their own models for change and for development, based on their conceptions of Latin American reality. Some of their perceptions and theories are distinctly different from those of North American scholars.

As the relationship between U.S. Latin Americanists and their southern counterparts has become more equal and less U.S.-dominated, there has been a growing dialogue on common intellectual concerns—and debate over the most appropriate roles of the Latin Americanist. Latin American studies in the United States must find new roles in the seventies under the handicap of rather severe constraints: constraints which are having decided effects on its present shape and future direction. Latin American scholars in the region itself seem to be more certain of their role in the seventies, but also must operate under very real and difficult constraints.

## II. The Challenge of Constraint

Universities throughout the hemisphere face severe restrictions at the budgetary level. In the United States, once-generous funding for area studies has sharply declined, a problem compounded by the rapidly inflating costs of research and training. Latin American universities have not experienced quite the same "peaking-out" of support. Indeed, investment in higher education in Latin America has substantially increased over the past two decades. However, the level of support of Latin American institutions has never approached that prevailing in the United States in either relative or absolute terms. U.S. Latin American studies centers face the "new depression"; Latin American institutions deal with continuing financial limitations. It is not likely that these conditions will change radically in the near future.

Both U.S. and Latin American participants in the Mexico City conference believed that the dwindling of support for Latin American studies in the United States after the "boom" of the sixties was inevitable. Some felt that Latin American studies had been over-expanded in terms of the United States' ability to use its products effectively. Latin Americans pointed out, however, that their countries had gained significantly through the training of a large group of native Latin American professionals, a gain which could not have been achieved so rapidly without substantial U.S. funding. A similar statement would apply to the United States itself, which had previously neglected area training for its own citizens. It was noted that at least ten major U.S. Latin American studies centers survive. The implication was that several "centers of excellence" with sufficient funding, breadth of staff and course offerings might better serve the needs of the field in the seventies than a larger, thinner network of institutions and programs.

U.S. institutions must deal with constraints which are partly economic and partly social in origin. Area studies centers face the same problem of 'marketability' for their graduate degree recipients that faces numerous other specialties within the humanities and social sciences. In a declining job market, graduate students tend to seek the protection of a course pattern that they believe will offer them the most likelihood of gaining employment upon completion of their degrees. Decisions of this nature may lead students whose career choice might have been Latin American concentration within their discipline to concentrations currently considered more saleable. Such career-consciousness is understandable. However, it may lead to the diminution or elimination of Latin American course offerings in some institutions, and to the loss of a generation of trained professionals in some of the less-populated subspecialties.

A number of Latin Americanists see a danger that the "critical mass" necessary for effective work in the field may be seriously diluted. The rationale for a limited number of "centers of excellence" draws much of its force from this perception. "Critical mass" might be defined as a combination of intellectual and physical resources with the means of integrating and utilizing these resources at a sufficiently high level to produce effective results. In terms of Latin American studies, sufficient "critical mass" would imply adequate:

1. institutional support, coordination and direction
2. numbers of trained personnel in all relevant disciplines and subdisciplines
3. funds for field research and for investment in library and other resources
4. means of integration (scholarly journals, other publications, conferences, professional associations, visiting lecturerships, etc.)

5. opportunities to transfer the knowledge acquired through research and scholarship through teaching
6. opportunities to apply knowledge to the solution of social problems.

All these elements are necessary to maintain vitality in a professional field. They are obviously easier to maintain in a populous, deeply-entrenched core discipline than in a relatively thinly dispersed field such as Latin American studies.

It can be argued that it is better to sustain a limited number of area studies centers at a high level of productivity than to seek to maintain area concentrations in large numbers of institutions. Although valuable work can be done by an area specialist somewhat isolated on a campus which has a marginal or diminished commitment to area studies, assuming the soundness of the individual's training and research plan, the other conditions for achieving "critical mass" are more difficult to achieve outside the larger centers under present economic conditions. However, a broader dispersion of area studies does have the important advantage of making at least some area knowledge accessible to students on a large number of campuses. The needs of the area studies professions are not necessarily coincident with needs of individual campuses in this respect.

Essentially this problem of resource distribution is one that will have to be resolved by individual colleges and universities, where the allocation of limited resources has become the major issue of the day. Many college and university administrators face the unpleasant task of performing a type of triage on the activities of their institutions. The U.S. academic environment has become much more competitive in the seventies, as decisions about institutional priorities are being made in the context of a zero-sum game.

An economist participating in the Mexico City meeting observed that:

Today, unlike the growth era of the sixties, three elements are, from the standpoint of academic departments, in short supply: money for salaries, positions for appointment, and tenured slots for promotion. Each of these scarcities has become an object of contention among competing claimants. In consequence, the old formula of providing 'seed money' to departments through external grants to area studies centers no longer suffices to build or even maintain program strength. Unless area studies programs can somehow be provided an influence over all three of these scarce commodities, the prospects for disinvestment in this important segment of human capital seem certain.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. area studies specialists must take on unaccustomed activist roles in counteracting the constraints on their profession. The socioeconomic issues of "marketability," academic unemployment and underemployment, resource allocation, maintenance of vitality and productivity, etc., are all facets of the basic problem of U.S. colleges and universities today: How to re-orient a vast and expansionist U.S. higher education structure to the needs and conditions of an era of limited growth?

For Latin Americans the basic problem facing higher education is quite different. The question for which they are seeking an answer or answers is: How to re-orient Latin American higher education to meet pressing needs for national development?

Latin American nations span an extremely broad range of development, from large and rapidly-industrializing countries with bright economic futures to predominantly agricultural nations with limited growth prospects. Relative rates of educational investment vary, as do levels of internal political stability.

Population rates also cover a wide spectrum—ranging from less than one and one-half percent to over three and one-half percent per year—as do the social policies of governments. All such factors have their effects on needs for, and payoff from, higher education. These examples of the variables confronting Latin American higher education as it attempts to play a developmental role suggest that the solutions presented for developmental problems will also vary markedly.

However, Latin American nations share many "regional" characteristics, most notably their common language and cultural heritage and their traditional roles as exporters of commodities and importers of capital and finished goods, roles which have placed them in a position of dependency in regard to other Western nations, and in particular to the United States. In the last two decades there has been an increasingly successful movement toward regional integration and solidarity, as nations face similar problems in alleviating mass unemployment and underemployment, in gaining a more equal voice in international affairs, in the application of research and technology, and in other areas.

Universities throughout Latin America are being asked to participate directly in the development process, by carrying out the required research, designing the appropriate technology, and training the correct numbers of people for the new tasks of national modernization. In so doing, these institutions face their own unique constraints.

The financial restrictions on Latin American institutions are exacerbated by rapidly increasing enrollments that place heavy pressures on faculty and facilities which have not expanded rapidly enough to keep up with demand. While dealing with these pressures, universities are also seeking to overcome

<sup>3</sup>William P. Glade, discussion paper prepared for 1975 CHEAR Mexico City conference, p. 18.



the constraint of their traditional role. The major task of older Latin American universities was professional training, typically carried out by part-time faculty in fields such as law, medicine, the humanities and engineering. In many institutions professional training was the exclusive objective; in others, it dominated other goals, including high-level scholarship and original research.

The recognition of a broader mission for the Latin American university as a major actor in the development process obviously mandated extensive structural reforms. In traditional universities, new faculties and research institutes have been created. A group of newer universities has been established on a different pattern than the traditional model. The basic unit of these new-model universities is the full-time department organized by academic discipline or disciplines, rather than the part-time professional faculty. Interdisciplinary efforts are becoming increasingly common, as are efforts to attack common problems through regional efforts spearheaded by intergovernmental groups, funding agencies, and university and professional associations with innovative outlooks. There are now at least thirty-five regional training and research institutions working in fields that range from demography and urban planning to nutrition and public administration. These organizations are typically sponsored by international agencies, are multilaterally financed, and draw students and faculty from a number of Latin American nations.

Positive efforts to overcome the constraints of traditional roles are abundant in Latin America. The very speed and size of these efforts present some problems, however. As noted above, library, computer and other

facilities still fall short of the demands made upon them, nor have all the new academic programs established in recent years reached satisfactory levels of quality and productivity. These factors present particular problems for advanced graduate training. Many Latin American graduate students must still seek their professional certification abroad, where the training they receive is often inappropriate to the tasks they will be expected to perform upon their return home. This continues to be a frustrating problem. It has caused some Latin Americans to express sharp criticism of the doctoral-level training offered Latin Americans in U.S. institutions. A number of Latin Americans carry this criticism even further, arguing that the whole approach to Latin American studies in the United States needs radical reform and modernization.

### III. The Challenge of Role

**T**he constraints on both U.S. and Latin American higher education represent obstacles that can be overcome. The further challenge to Latin Americanists is one of role. Latin Americans themselves have already chosen what they believe to be their appropriate role for the immediate future, and are asking U.S. Latin Americanists to reappraise theirs. U.S. Latin Americanists have their own domestic reasons for re-evaluating their objectives. The question is whether U.S. Latin American studies, while still attempting to deal with the end of growth, will be able to deal fully with the challenge of role.

U.S. Latin Americanists, having developed a fine new set of tools during the phase of rapid institutionalization of area studies in the sixties, now seek to maintain the vitality of the profession in the restricted environment of the seventies. Area studies programs must

compete with many other programs for the limited funds of the university, and no longer enjoy the special status of favored children of the Federal Government. It is particularly unfortunate that this should be the case, since large numbers of Latin Americanists trained during the sixties are now in their most productive years of academic life—the point at which investment in Latin American course offerings, interdisciplinary research, postdoctoral training, professional exchanges, etc., might prove of greatest value.

A number of strategies have been proposed to maintain the profession's vitality. The argument for maintaining "critical mass" through concentration of resources in a small number of centers has already been noted. Some believe that the number of large area studies centers will decrease even further unless their service functions are expanded. One proposal is that area centers form institutional ties with newer, smaller universities, community and junior colleges, providing them with personnel, instruction, access to libraries, etc., on a continuing basis. Language study would be a particular emphasis of such arrangements, as a countervailing force against the rapidly increasing monolingualism of U.S. higher education. Related efforts to build new clienteles for area studies course content might create institutional linkages between the centers and schools of business administration, centers for development studies, etc.

It has also been suggested that Latin American studies make common cause with other area studies programs, focusing on topics relevant to all Third World nations. Others believe that much more could be done through inter-university collaboration. Universities with limited strengths already existing in Latin American studies could jointly sponsor advanced training and research, maximizing scarce resources.

All these strategies present new roles for U.S. Latin American studies in the context of the traditional area studies approach. The *raison d'être* of area studies in the United States has been that it provides both an alternative and an enrichment to the traditional disciplines by introducing area-specific data and interdisciplinary perspectives to traditional scholarship. Regional study in Latin America itself has found its new roles within the context of what might be called "mission-oriented" scholarship. The *raison d'être* for regional studies in Latin America has increasingly become that it applies scholarly resources to help solve shared problems of Latin American development.

Financial exigencies are forcing some U.S. universities away from the area approach and back toward the disciplines, while the exigencies of development needs have led Latin American institutions away from traditional patterns toward a change agent role. It is notable in this respect that the Latin American regional studies center is typically an autonomous institute with a problem-solving orientation, not tied to the traditional university as the area studies center typically is in the United States, and thus not tied to its traditional concept of research and scholarship.

The divergence between U.S. approaches and Latin American needs presents difficulties for Latin Americans, many of whom still seek their advanced training in the United States. A number of Latin American scholars believe that Latin American studies in the United States has yet to achieve "critical mass" in terms of productive potential. They believe that U.S. programs are still excessively dominated by the disciplinary tradition and Eurocentric

approaches to knowledge—to the detriment of a real understanding of Latin America:

The universality principle has made impossible a sociology of Latin America, a political science of Latin America, an economics of Latin America. Latin America was seen as a specific instance of a general course of events already studied and fully comprehended in the experience of the Western European countries and the United States. By the same token, the Latin Americanist became not someone who was interested in discovering the intricate specific laws of the historical development of the various Latin American social formations but one who applied already discovered 'universal' laws, instruments and methods to the specific instance of Latin America. Under this myopic optic, there was no room for the formation of a Latin Americanist as a specialist in his own right; what was needed was to train these individuals in the 'universal' theories that existed; to train universal sociologists, universal political scientists and interest them in Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Latin Americans have observed that the development of area students in the United States is frequently impeded by insufficiencies in language preparation, by inadequate opportunities for field experience, and by the severely limited course offerings dealing with specifically Latin American subject matter on all but a very few U.S. campuses. (In a seeming paradox, these insufficiencies may be heightened in the future by a negative effect of the new strength of Latin American institutions. Their diminished need for "borrowed" faculty and researchers also diminishes the opportunities for field experience that such "borrowing" used to provide for U.S. Latin Americanists.)

The quantity of research produced by U.S. Latin Americanists, while impressive, is described from the Latin American perspective as often uncoordinated, non-cumulative, and based on theoretical approaches that do not reflect Latin American reality. Some believe that careerism skews many

researchers away from the research that is most needed and toward research that will promote professional advancement.

These observers believe that much should be done to change and strengthen U.S. Latin American studies. They heartily support attempts to concentrate resources, whether through inter-university cooperation or through the concentration of funds and personnel in relatively few centers of excellence. They suggest that U.S. centers would benefit from a marked growth in Latin American input through visiting lecturerships, team research on issues or problems of mutual concern, and long-term collaborative relationships. They note that international funding agencies would look with favor on such collaboration, and would support it financially.

In regard to the training of U.S. Latin Americanists, it has been proposed that U.S. and Latin American institutions offer joint M.A./Ph.D. programs, so that some extended field experience would form part of the U.S. area specialist's background. In regard to the training of their own nationals in the United States, Latin Americans would ask for a more flexible pattern of predoctoral training more suited to their needs. They also suggest that more postdoctoral fellowships should be provided to Latin Americans by U.S. institutions in order that those who studied elsewhere might benefit from the superior library and computer facilities available in U.S. universities.

In point of fact, many of these Latin American perspectives are shared by U.S. scholars. U.S. Latin Americanists are increasingly receptive to Latin American conceptions of reality, which act as a necessary corrective to North American perspectives and theories. Latin American scholarship has developed over the past three decades to the point

<sup>4</sup>Dillon Soares, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

at which real cross-fertilization of ideas is possible, and is in fact taking place. Problem-centered research is seen as both useful in itself and as a source of insights to the more traditional forms of scholarship. It can provide a focus for fundamental and applied research. U.S. Latin Americanists would also like to see U. S. students offered graduate opportunities for field experience and more language instruction. Given this convergence of views, it is unfortunate that many positive steps which might be taken to strengthen Latin American studies in the United States may be indefinitely delayed because of financial limitations and conflicting institutional priorities.

The role of Latin American studies is in flux, and this is particularly the case in the United States. Latin Americans are more united in their perception of the value of area study than U.S. Latin Americanists, because their mission orientation provides them with a focal point for training and research. Indeed, it would appear unlikely that U.S. Latin American studies will ever unify behind a single orientation, given the wide variety of demands and constraints placed on the field. North Americans cannot "study for" Latin America in quite the same way as Latin American nationals can, because the context of their research

and training is different, and because the uses they make of that research and training are different. Nonetheless, cross-fertilization and collaboration will increasingly occur, and should be encouraged.

Both U.S. and Latin American scholars recognize the great value of the resources they have generated—separately and together—over the past three decades. Although opportunities to apply these resources in a number of useful directions are being impeded by the constraints of the present, this may be a disguised blessing in some ways. A levelling-off period after a period of rapid growth is often the occasion for a re-grouping of forces—and for the reappraisal and self-criticism from which vital new directions emerge.

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