

## UBC's Latin American Studies Program: A Report and Assessment

May, 2017

The mission of UBC's Latin American Studies program is "To advance the study and teaching of Latin America at UBC and throughout the lower mainland." Over the past few years, we have made advances and consolidated our achievements in fulfilling this mission, but there is still plenty that could be done, and the institutional context remains precarious. Our challenge, which we have largely met, is how to leverage what are admittedly scant resources to have an impact on campus and off and contribute to providing productive spaces for teaching, learning, and debate about Latin America. We need to organize ourselves better as a productive team, to work with a new chair, so as to achieve these ambitious goals.

### *Activities*

Over the past few years we have organized, sponsored, co-sponsored, and/or simply publicized literally hundreds of events; as an indication of how many, there are almost 600 such posts in our website archive of "Past Events." Our involvement in these activities varies considerably, though in the first instance we perform a valuable service as a clearing-house for information on opportunities and events in the local area, mostly via our website (which received 13,000 pageviews over the past twelve months), but also via Facebook, Twitter, etc. This is a service offered by no other organization, and is a major part of what we offer the community at large.

After several years of experimentation in different formats, particularly in collaboration with SFU, the seminar series initiated this year has proved particularly successful, helped by the fact that we have a regular venue (and to some extent, institutional home) at the Liu Institute for Global Issues. To establish such a seminar was part of our agreement with the Liu, and over two semesters we organized eight talks (roughly, every three weeks), most of which were very well attended. Particularly successful were the sessions to launch and discuss books written by members of the Latin American Studies community here at UBC: these began last year with a seminar devoted to Bill French's *The Heart in the Glass Jar*, and has continued with events devoted to Alejandra Bronfman's *Isles of Noise* and Fabiola Bazo's *Desborde subterráneo*. These events not only have value in themselves, but also help establish a sense of community by pointing to the variety of work underway within the field at UBC.

Perhaps the highlight of the year was the one-day seminar on "The Ends of Latin America's Left Turns" held in collaboration with our partners at SFU in December. Beyond the fact that we were able to bring in a number of distinguished speakers (Renato Francisquini from Santa Catarina, Eric Hershberg from American U, Gerardo Muñoz from Princeton, Alejandro Velasco from NYU), this event was notable also for the number of faculty and students who participated, from across the disciplines at UBC (and SFU), from FHIS, History, Anthropology, Political Science, Land and Food Systems, etc. It is hoped that a publication might emerge from this event; but even at the time we managed to live-stream the proceedings, the video from which has been uploaded to YouTube.

The publication from this workshop may well emerge from the book series that we secured, with colleagues from SFU, from the University of Toronto Press. These books are envisaged as collaborative projects (three or so essays in each, with a co-written introduction) aimed at the general public and/or undergraduate market. The first title in the series should come out before long, and will deal with the role of the state in recent Mexican history and politics.

We also sponsored or co-sponsored a multitude of other events, some of which took place at UBC itself, others off campus. Our collaboration with groups or organizations such as the Mexican Consulate and the nascent Vancouver Latin American Cultural Centre is mutually enriching, and much appreciated by our off-campus partners. Not only do they appreciate the involvement of faculty and students from the university, and our help in publicity and the like, or providing a space for discussion and celebration, we can do this at little to no cost, for instance simply by booking rooms at university rates, later to be reimbursed. This year, perhaps the highlight of such collaboration was the "Tribute to Fernando del Paso" at Robson Square, which also brought together colleagues from SFU and UVic. But this is only the most recent of many such successful collaborations over the past few years.

Other high-profile partnerships (for which we could still be doing more) have been, for instance, with the Museum of Anthropology, which has put on at least three major exhibitions on Latin American themes in the past few years: one on silver, one on painting, and the most recent on the Amazon. We have worked to one degree or another with each of these, and faculty have been very involved in helping with talks, presentations, guided tours, and the like.

We should also add the continuing activity and success of the Liu Institute graduate working group on "Latin America and the Global." This is run by graduate students, and has for several years been a lively yet friendly space for the presentation of graduate student work. It is thanks to the working group that we were able to bring Ericka Beckman (of the University of Illinois, now Penn); next semester, we will be bringing Bram Acosta from the University of Arizona. Combined with our own regular seminar, the activities of the working group have made the Latin American Studies community by some distance the most active and visible group of students and researchers in the Liu Institute.

In the past, some of our most successful events have been related to current issues and problems in Latin America. For instance, our debate on mining and specifically Canadian corporations' role in resource extraction in the region produced much heat but also plenty of light, with an audience of many hundreds. We can and should do more along these lines, for example around issues of migration and immigration, or in response to specific newsworthy incidents and crises such as the situation in Venezuela, the Brazilian coup, and so on.

Finally, we should report however that the most high-profile activity organized by the program this year sadly could not come to fruition. In collaboration with colleagues at the University of Calgary and at SFU we raised over \$30,000 to invite Toni Negri (and his partner, Judith Revel) to speak in Alberta and British Columbia. Unfortunately, Negri's permission to enter the country was denied by Canadian Immigration and these

events had to be cancelled. Our Op-Ed on these events, published in *The Tyee*, was circulated far and wide, but obviously we (and UBC, not to mention Western Canada) missed out on what would have been a significant intellectual and academic event.

*In short, the program has been more active than ever over the past year or two. The challenge is to keep up this energy and commitment even as people (students and faculty) inevitably move on. Perhaps most specifically, our main collaborators both at SFU (Alec Dawson) and at the Mexican Consulate (Patricia de la Maza) are both leaving their posts this year. We have had an excellent and very productive working relationship with both, and it will be hard to replace them.*

### *Undergraduate Program*

We have been running the two core courses (LAST100, "Introduction to Latin American Studies" and LAST201, "Latin American Popular Culture"), for which we receive Faculty support. For several years we have not been able to run the other courses that are on the books (one of which LAST 303, has never been run; the other of which, LAST301, has been run in the past to great success, but only thanks to the generosity of the FHIS department). These courses have been taught both by permanent faculty and by a sessional, selected after an open competition and call for applications.

The major advance in the program over the past couple of years was the successful proposal for a grant from the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF), which gave us \$44,000 to produce a series of videos to enhance the teaching of LAST100, which bought us equipment, enabled us to contract specialist film-making advisors, and to hire a TA and post-doc RA. We produced twelve videos, many of which involved the participation of faculty from across the university, and students from LAST100 produced more than a dozen more. We hope to continue to produce more. One of the aims of this project was also to make this material available openly on the web to anyone interested in the subjects covered, again leveraging our resources for maximum impact and visibility. As such, our YouTube channel has received almost 7,000 views.

All this of course is to say nothing of the excellent range of courses taught across the Faculty by the great team of Latin Americanists at UBC. Students come energized from their experiences in courses in Political Science, Geography, Hispanic Studies, History, and so on. Our challenge is to help link and coordinate these enlightening and exhilarating course offerings in an Area Studies framework.

Moreover and at the same time, it is no doubt time for some further curriculum renewal within the program. Parts of the list of ancillary courses are out of date, and the descriptions of the program itself as well as of individual courses could do with rewriting. We have some student testimonials on our website, but we could do with more, perhaps in other media such as video. Any new program chair will also need to work more closely with fellow faculty and above all heads of department (in History, Anthropology, etc.) to ensure that courses with Latin American content are run, and to persuade/enable permanent faculty to teach the LAS T core courses. It has further been suggested for instance that a renumbering of the courses (e.g. LAST201 to become a 300-level course) may help attract students looking for electives in their final years. We will need an imaginative, thoughtful, and perhaps radical approach to rethinking and restructuring our program, perhaps particularly at a time when, I think, for many

students Latin America is no longer such an automatically attractive option of study as it was perhaps a few years ago.

It would certainly help our case were the number of majors and minors to increase, as well as the numbers of students in LAST classes. We have had more students in LAST100 and 201 recently, and can expect thanks to the innovations and renewal already underway to attract more. But we need to work further on publicity, not least given that we have little in the way of institutional home or support to do so. Along with other interdisciplinary programs, we have organized and participated in information meetings, though attendance was scarce.

As well as these efforts, we have attempted to build up more *esprit de corps* among current majors and minors. Money (\$2,000) from a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grant was paid to an enthusiastic major who wished to work on this, who also organized a social event. (He also helped out with our social media presence.) But there is no doubt that this is hard going. One of the promises of moving to the Liu Institute was that there would be space for Latin American Studies students, but this depends on student initiative and has yet to come to fruition.

*In short, the undergraduate program has had an influx of funds, thanks to the TLEF and SoTL, but the program, and its descriptions and associated publicity, need work, and we need to find ways in which better to get undergraduate students involved and to identify with a program that struggles to offer much in the way of an institutional home.*

#### *Other*

The program's presence on the Internet and on social media is extensive, but could be updated and made more efficient. We continue to have one of the largest, most ambitious, and most continually-updated websites certainly among interdisciplinary programs, and to some extent in the Faculty as a whole. It gets 13,000 pageviews each year. But precisely the ambitiousness of our web presence means that some aspects do not get updated as often as they might. To give but one example, adding all the possible course options for undergraduates each year is labour-intensive, and has been left by the wayside. Likewise, we used to write more on the program's blog, and generally do more overall with the website. Moving to the Liu might have meant some assistance with such functions, but this has not as yet emerged. Moreover, it is no doubt time for the site structure to be converted into the new university web format, without at the same time losing our distinct identity. We have begun talking with Arts ISIT (with whom we have a very good relationship) to proceed with this project, but this is going to take considerable time and effort.

We also have a presence on other social media: on Twitter, we have 532 followers, and have tweeted 790 times--mostly announcements for events etc., but not solely, and we have occasionally "live-tweeted" events of particular interest. On Facebook, we have 1,250 followers, but our posting there is sporadic. And our YouTube channel has almost 60 subscribers and 7,000 views. More could be done on all these platforms, but again this is labour-intensive.

Finally, we have shown (and not only through the TLEF, SoTL, collaborations with SFU and Calgary, and so on) that the program can also be a vehicle for seeking grants and other forms of external support. Perhaps most notably, this year we have our first post-doctoral researcher, who is with us thanks to funds from Chile's CONICYT (Comisión Nacional de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica), though we ourselves had to come up with funds to provide benefits etc. Regularly, other researchers and scholars, both local and foreign, are interested in some kind of affiliation with the program, and it would be good to find a cost-effective way to make this happen more often.

*In short, we have laid the basis for still more activity and impact, and now have platforms (and an associated visibility with followers and the like) that we could operationalize much more comprehensively and dramatically. We need to update much of this material, but above all we need the resources to keep it updated, and even expand it.*

### *Institutional Context*

The major change of the past year is our move to the auspices of the Liu Institute. This has provided us with an office (shared with African Studies) for the program and, while she was teaching, our sessional was also provided with space. An identification with the Liu has, moreover, provided us with something of an institutional home, however tenuous. But this is a double-edged sword...

In the first place, we remain rather betwixt and between when it comes to administrative support. In practice, we are more tenants than integral members of the Liu. As such, what administrative aid we get still comes mainly from the Faculty, which itself has been going through changes in this area: there have been four different administrative assistants over the past two years or so, while interdisciplinary programs have also shifted portfolio between Associate Deans. The framework and procedures within which we have been operating have changed multiple times, and this has sometimes led to confusion and problems of communication. (The program chair admits that there was a period in which he did not contribute very well to dealing with these problems.)

Perhaps more fundamentally, the Liu Institute is shortly (along with the Institute for Asian Research) to be absorbed within a new School for Public Policy. Frankly, this has the potential at least to make the compatibility between the program and the Liu stretched at best. We fit well within an institute for "global issues," adding Area Studies to their portfolio. We fit less well within a School for Public Policy, given that policy is the strength and interest of almost none of our constituent faculty members.

*In short, whoever is the new program chair needs, I believe, to make it a priority to establish and maintain good lines of communication and understanding with all the various figures in what is a complex and mutable institutional context: the Associate Dean, the administrative assistant(s), the Faculty Financial Officer, the Head of the Liu Institute, the Head of the School of Public Policy, the Museum of Anthropology, as well as the various chairs of the relevant departments from which we draw faculty expertise (FHIS, History, Geography Political Science, Anthropology, LFS, Art History, etc. etc.).*

*Summary*

The program in Latin American Studies is dynamic and has been more active and successful than ever in the past couple of years. We have an extraordinary richness and breadth of faculty expertise and talent across the Faculty (and potentially beyond). We have shown a little of what the program can do, but we could do much more. It is time for a new chair, but it is also time to distribute more the responsibilities and work required to support the program, and at the same to establish ourselves in our institutional context a little more securely, with a solid plan for the future.

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