EVALUATION OF THE CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDIES (CLACS) AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Both participants in this review have conducted numerous departmental and program reviews of this sort at a wide variety of institutions. This one was particularly well organized. We received a comprehensive package of informational material in a timely fashion prior to our campus visit, which took place February 24-26, 2010. We had group or individual meetings with no fewer than 56 members of the MSU faculty and instructional or administrative staff, plus graduate and undergraduate students. Everything happened on time. Our meetings were substantive and included a lengthy conversation with President Lou Anna Simon and a long conference call with Provost Kim Wilcox. The preparation and execution of such a complex agenda underlines an essential fact: under the leadership of Robert Blake and Jeffery Riedinger, CLACS and ISP are in the hands of superb academic leaders. Our conversations during our two-day visit reinforced this favorable impression.

Overall Assessment

MSU has a long and substantive history of active engagement in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, an institutional tradition and an array of resources built up over decades, ranging from technical and social studies in agricultural development to the health sciences and the humanities. MSU already has extraordinary and unique strengths that make CLACS one of the outstanding Latin American Studies programs in North America. We found ample reason to believe that CLACS is well situated to enter some of its best years ever, owing partly to the high quality of its current leadership. The recent self-assessment developed via faculty retreats, the initiatives undertaken to develop participatory planning for the future with the active involvement of affiliated faculty, newly invigorated seminar series and a major annual symposium—all reflect a dynamic, inclusive, interdisciplinary approach that bodes well for the future of CLACS.

Some elements of the program need attention, of course, and maintaining existing activities and programs while developing new initiatives, in difficult budgetary times,
will require innovative approaches to funding. Our impression, reinforced in several conversations during our campus visit, is that there are many good ideas being considered and steps are being taken to carry them out. Despite the recognition that such programmatic innovation will require additional funding, there seems to be too little emphasis on how such activities will be funded, given the current financial situation of the university. Because of the pervasive importance of securing additional financial resources, we begin with a focus on possible development strategies. Other sections of this report address both strengths and weaknesses in several areas and are arranged in no particular order.

**Development Strategies**

Like all universities, and particularly public institutions, MSU has suffered and is probably facing more budget cuts. It is therefore not appropriate for CLACS to simply plead poverty and harass the administration for increased resources from central funds. In times of funding constraints, area studies and interdisciplinary programs are often viewed with suspicion for fear that they will leach resources from academic departments. Administrators facing difficult choices might make invidious distinctions between core activities and peripheral programs. It does not have to be this way. Area studies programs bring disciplines together and expand the international reach of the institution, thus enriching the university across the spectrum from advanced research opportunities to graduate training to the undergraduate experience. In an analogous way, such programs can have a positive role in resource development. We strongly urge CLACS to use its existing strengths and its dynamic potential to create its own development strategies and thereby put itself in a position to bring money to the table. What we urge is for CLACS to secure sufficient funding so that departments, as well as administrators faced with multiple budgetary demands, will view the Center as an ally and a resource rather than a competitor or a drain.

Several people noted that MSU started giving serious attention to resource development only recently. “Behind the curve” was a term we heard more than once. We were also told that the MSU administration is pushing academic units to be more aggressive in seeking grants. Such a strategy makes sense for many programs and certainly should be pursued, particularly in areas where MSU is already strong. Latin American and Caribbean Studies is one of those strengths, and the initiatives currently being developed in programming provide the basis for new initiatives in resource development.

Still, not all CLACS activities fall in categories granting agencies are likely to fund. One of the major funders for interdisciplinary area studies programs, of course, has been the Department of Education through Title VI National Resource Center grants for Language and Area Studies. Although NRC status in the past indicates the elite rank of area studies programs to which CLACS can aspire, CLACS does not currently hold an NRC grant. Nor do we feel that this is a good time for CLACS to seek renewed Title VI funding. CLACS may be better positioned to write such a proposal in the next
funding cycle, perhaps in a consortial arrangement with a neighboring university. More on this later.

In the meantime, we urge CLACS and MSU to seek funds from other sources, giving particular attention to gifts from private individuals. In MSU’s large alumni base, there are undoubtedly many who have ties with area studies at MSU or perhaps with Latin America—the functional result of the long and broad institutional history we have mentioned. Some of these people are based in the USA, while others have roots in Latin America. Moreover, it is likely that some of these individuals would be able to make a substantial gift based on a variety of motivations, perhaps including a naming opportunity for either CLACS or ISP. Others who may not want or be able to make a large gift might be interested in endowing programs to benefit students, promote research in particular areas, or perhaps establish a chair or professorship. What follows are some ideas on how MSU might target such development activities, based on the particular focus of CLACS:

**An endowment for CLACS** in exchange for a naming opportunity. The name of CLACS is of course the Center’s most valuable asset for naming and should not be conferred cheaply. While not familiar with MSU’s gift history, we suggest that the name of the Center would be worth at least $10 million. Lest anyone think such a gift unlikely, we point out that several of the strongest Latin American Studies centers in North America rest on endowment gifts made by wealthy individuals, including the Teresa Lozano Long Center at the University of Texas at Austin, the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard, the Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies at CUNY, the Lemann Institute for Brazilian Studies at the University of Illinois, and the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University. It only takes one individual to make a major gift of this sort. A good task for the MSU development office and alumni association, in consultation with faculty members who might have substantive contacts with former students relevant to this effort, would be to comb the alumni database to see if such a person might already exist.

**Endowments to support travel/research scholarships** for students, both graduate and undergraduate. Each of these scholarships could be named for a donor, and they need not be expensive. For example, an endowment gift of $100,000 would generate a useable yield of $4,000 to $5,000 per year in perpetuity—enough to enable a student to spend a period of study in Latin America. As a planned gift, an estate gift, or even a personal gift, $100,000 is within the reach of many MSU alumni, not to mention professors who might leave part of their estate for this purpose. Like students at many public universities, many MSU students need to work part time to finance their education. Potential donors might therefore be particularly moved to endow a program of this sort if they realized that their gift could allow working students to study abroad merely by making up for their loss in wages.

**Endowments to support Latin American students at MSU.** We repeatedly heard that, as part of its international mission and as a means of enriching the diversity of campus life, MSU would like to attract more students from Latin
America. A gift of $500,000 would produce a usable yield of $20,000 to $25,000 per year in perpetuity. A gift of this sort could be particularly interesting to wealthy alums actually from Latin America who might be reluctant to donate to a general fund but would find attractive a gift allowing their compatriots to study at MSU. These funds of course could be leveraged with other grants available at the university, such as research assistantships, out-of-state tuition waivers and the like. In short, in this and other areas donors might be enticed by the notion that their money will actually attract funding from other sources. Such funds could also be used to match funding from scholarship agencies in Latin America—CONACYT in Mexico or CAPES in Brazil, for example.

**Endowments to support teaching fellowships in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.** We repeatedly heard concerns that MSU was falling behind in supporting graduate students at the same time that professors were increasingly unable to get Teaching Assistants for large lecture courses. CLACS or ISP might therefore consider seeking endowment funding to support teaching fellowships. This item would have the triple benefit of supporting graduate education while also enriching undergraduate courses and enabling tenure-steam faculty to focus more on their program of advanced research. It would also encourage faculty to offer courses on Latin American topics if they knew in advance that TA support would be available through CLACS.

**Endowments for visiting professorships and postdoctoral research.** Many universities have long lists of agreements signed with some fanfare by administrative officials declaring an intention to collaborate. Too often such agreements remain hollow frameworks for goodwill. Nothing builds substantive interaction between Latin American and United States universities better than the exchange of faculty and advanced researchers. Funds for such visiting appointments could be leveraged from national agencies like those mentioned above. In addition, several important Latin American universities—e.g., El Colegio de México, La Universidad de Chile, and Universidade de São Paulo—already have programs to support members of their faculty to spend time at a US university. Such appointments might be structured as exchanges by which MSU professors could spend time at a Latin American university while their counterpart is at MSU. If packaged with funds for graduate student support, whole teams of advanced researchers can benefit from such starting points.

**Endowed professorships or chairs.** A university is no better than its students and its faculty. A perpetual problem facing area studies programs is their dependency on departments to appoint and retain professors with regional expertise and research interests. Rather than having to beg departments to keep Latin America in mind in such circumstances, CLACS should be able to bring resources to the effort to ensure that Latin America and the Caribbean continue to be a priority in considering faculty replacement and new hires. CLACS could do this by offering endowment earnings either as chairs or professorships to support appointments, and thus have a major impact on persuading academic departments throughout the University to maintain or increase their strength in Latin
American Studies. Such funds could support a particular appointment or perhaps retain someone being wooed by another institution. But once an individual so supported leaves MSU, the funding would revert to CLACS to be used in a similar fashion for a new appointment, possibly in a different department. MSU undoubtedly has funding schemes of this sort already in place. What we suggest is that CLACS and ISP be authorized to seek funding for such endowed appointments that could then be distributed as needed to departments.

**Title VI National Resource Center funding.** For several decades NRC status has been the brass ring for which many foreign area studies programs at major academic institutions have grasped. Although the specific number of such NRC grants has varied over time depending on funding levels, the total number of NRC grants nationwide is limited. Although the competition to achieve such status is not strictly a zero-sum game in which one grantee must be cut for another to gain such designation, something close to that pattern has obtained in practice. The Title VI program is based on the “center of excellence” model which rewards institutions that have already established themselves as among the best in the nation, as measured by the application criteria. Thus any center so designated can rightfully claim to be among the elite few. The fact that the CLACS at MSU has received Title VI funding in the past indicates that it is within the range of eligible institutions.

A pattern that has developed since the 1980s has been for area centers within reasonable geographical proximity, especially when their institutional profiles are complementary, to apply for NRC funding as consortia. (A current list of Latin America centers, with a link to the website of each, is at http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/resources/index.asp) In this regard, we note that the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, which is currently an NRC Center for Latin America, is in relatively close proximity to East Lansing, and that its institutional profile is in some ways complementary to that of CLACS at MSU. While MSU’s Latin America-focused strengths in the social sciences and humanities are many (the Music program might be mentioned, in particular), the historical and ongoing emphasis of MSU on agricultural and other development issues, based primarily but not exclusively in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, could be a major strength in any discussion that might develop with the University of Michigan regarding the possibility of a consortium application as a joint NRC for Latin American Studies. It should also be recognized that the allocation of NRC Title VI center grants is influenced to some degree by political considerations related to geographical distribution across the USA. The question of whether two major universities in central Michigan could expect to be included in the list of individual (non-consortia) NRC centers thus becomes relevant.

We conclude this section by reiterating what we said earlier: CLACS can prosper only if it brings more money to the university. But in order to put initiatives like those outlined above into operation the university must be willing to provide essential administrative support and seed funding. CLACS cannot take advantage
of such opportunities unless its basic viability is assured. Launching a suite of such development initiatives would also capitalize on the recently invigorated leadership of CLACS. The result could be that in the long run, CLACS would be a contributor to the financial resource pool available at MSU, even as it continues to contribute in the areas of instruction, research, and cultural enrichment.

Language Instruction

Advanced foreign language proficiencies are essential to any successful area studies program. We use the plural “proficiencies” since a college-level instructional program should aim towards building not only oral proficiency as it has been defined by the Foreign Service, ACTFL, and, on a popular level, by commercial programs like Berlitz and Rosetta stone. Rather, university-level language instruction should have as its goal the ability to interact with a foreign culture at a high intellectual level which means cultural literacy as well as oral proficiency. In this regard, we were impressed by how many MSU faculty across disciplines expressed interest in improving foreign language. Faculty in many areas who work in Latin America, including those in technical agricultural fields, recognize the importance of language and cultural literacy for the success of their own research and for the training of graduate students, particularly as these activities involve collaboration with local counterparts in the region.

We also noted with pleasure that MSU has in recent years developed a lively Portuguese program in recognition of Brazil’s rising importance and the substantial presence of Portuguese in Africa and African Studies, an area for which MSU enjoys preeminence among North American universities. With reference to competitiveness for Title VI Center funding, we note that for the Latin America and Caribbean region Spanish is not considered a critical or less-commonly-taught language, so an instructional program in Portuguese (and/or a major indigenous language of the region such as Quechua or Nahuatl) is essential for NRC eligibility, and the Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships that are an important complement to the Title VI program.

Still, not all is well in Spanish language studies. We met with several members of the Spanish language faculty, including the current coordinator of lower division (first and second-year) Carmen Albaladejo and interim chair Douglas Noverr, who is “on loan” from the Department of Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures. We also received copies of course syllabi, course exams and the placement exam in Spanish. From these materials and our conversations, we determined that the Spanish program needs attention. Items:

The Spanish program has no clear performance objectives. The course and placement exams we saw were grammar-focused and relied almost exclusively on fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice questions that required no communicative interaction. These exams most surely did not provide a metric for measuring communicative competence. While grammatical accuracy is essential, the program needs to look beyond structure and forms, and focus on performance objectives that aim towards oral and written interaction at a high intellectual level. ACTFL proficiency guidelines are a good start
in this direction, but just a start. Language instruction at a university level must have
cultural literacy as one of its goals; indeed, it is cultural literacy that separates, in
theory at least, university language teaching from the instruction one might find in
Berlitz or even the Foreign Service instruction, not to mention computerized programs
like Rosetta Stone. The exact nature of outcome expectations would of course need to
be consulted widely among all language instructors, but clearly this is a discussion that
needs to begin.

The program’s approach to teacher training struck us as haphazard and improvised
from one year to the next. While new graduate students are required to take a methods
course, this course serves several language departments and gets passed from one
professor to another depending on the year and who is available. We secured a copy of
the syllabus used last fall term for a course titled “Approaches to (Romance) Language
Instruction” taught by Jeannette Sánchez-Naranjo, an assistant professor. Her syllabus
was nicely done and showed up-to-date familiarity with second-language acquisition as
a lively field of research. We saw no evidence, however, that the information covered
in this course has altered actual language instruction in Spanish in any significant way.
Indeed, we heard from graduate students that there was a near total disconnect between
issues raised in the course regarding methods and assessment and what actually goes on
in most MSU Spanish-language classrooms.

Graduate student teachers receive little supervision in the form of in-service training,
class observations, and professional development—this owing partly to the fact that the
entire administrative load of the language program appears to fall on one person, Prof.
Carmen Albaladejo. No matter how competent or hardworking, no one charged with
such a huge load can give each teacher and language section the attention they need.

In view of the above, we recommend that MSU hire an applied linguist, preferably in a
tenure or tenure-track line, with primary responsibility for coordinating the language
program at all levels while modernizing and giving coherence to the language
sequence. This person should have specific academic training in teaching and research
in second-language acquisition and be up to date on ongoing changes in methods,
materials and outcome assessments. In addition, this person should be able to lead the
Spanish language program in the use of emerging technologies. Ideally this person’s
research should include classroom instruction so that a position of this sort would offer
opportunities to develop a research agenda rooted in the language program itself. Once
a year, this person would teach a course on second-language acquisition and methods
specific to Spanish. The course would have both theoretical and practical dimensions in
that students would gain an understanding of second-language acquisition as a dynamic
field of academic inquiry while also mastering the specific strategies and practices
germane to the Spanish and Portuguese programs at MSU, perhaps through an
apprenticeship program with more experienced teachers. The course would be required
of all graduate students and instructors as a prerequisite to teaching in the program and
would carry graduate credit towards meeting degree requirements in both the MA and
the PhD. And finally, this person should be given resources to assemble a team of
course supervisors so that the administration of the program does not fall on one
person, as is currently the case. MSU already hires lecturers to teach language courses.
Ideally, these lecture lines could be given to people capable of supervising courses and working under the language coordinator as part of a coherent team. By using lecturers in this fashion, our recommendation would involve only one additional faculty hire, this being the language coordinator.

Study Abroad

We were impressed at the variety of options available to MSU students for study abroad, both short-term familiarization and research programs and longer-term cultural immersion options. Indeed, some of the programs for short-term intensive experiences and internship experiences are exemplary. We were also impressed by the number and variety of research programs available through the Department of Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics in Latin America and the Center for Advanced Study of International Development. Possibilities such as these are not as readily available at many prestigious universities and should be highlighted as unique advantages that MSU has over many of its peers. Several of the undergraduates we met spoke movingly of how experiences of this sort had impacted their lives and their educational choices.

Still, we felt that more attention could be given to traditional study-abroad possibilities such as a semester at a foreign university for the express purpose of increasing language proficiencies and cultural literacy. We were told that many MSU students cannot spend a lengthy time abroad because they need to work to support themselves in school. Study abroad should not become the privilege of those who can afford to take advantage of such opportunities. On the contrary, it is often those students who find such activities to be a financial burden who can benefit the most from them. This brings us back to an item mentioned earlier: the need to seek financial resources for students who find themselves in this bind. We also encourage MSU to search for opportunities for graduate students to study at foreign universities and to not view travel abroad only as an opportunity for field research. Many Latin American universities have academic programs in traditional disciplines such as history, anthropology, political science and literature that are comparable to those of North American universities. Seeking student exchanges at the graduate level is a largely unexplored field of opportunities for which MSU is ideally suited. Indeed, MSU might consider developing joint degree programs by which students could simultaneously earn graduate degrees from MSU and a foreign university. Such joint-degree programs are fairly common in MBA programs; there are good reasons to develop them for other disciplines as well.

Curriculum Design and Degree Programs

The LACS specialization (interdisciplinary minor) now in place, requiring 24 credits of area studies courses plus a two-year level of language competency, seems appropriate for the range of LAC-focus courses offered at the undergraduate level. It would be desirable to develop more flexible ways of meeting the expectations of a specialization, including counting experiential learning or a cultural/language immersion experience in place of some on-campus course credits, or measuring usable language proficiency in place of some arbitrary level of language courses.
Doing so, however, implies an advising and evaluation system that is capable of measuring equivalencies to traditional metrics involving classroom credit hours. Such equivalencies are, by definition, never exact, and there is no guarantee that a trip to tropical climates in the Americas, for example, is automatically preferable to one or another on-campus course experience. The key issue is to set generalizable and reachable objectives, and then develop valid ways of measuring achievement of such goals.

As an undergraduate major, the Global and Area Studies major with a regional concentration in Latin American and Caribbean Studies provides a standardized degree structure with the flexibility of regional specialization. It would be desirable for CLACS, perhaps via a dedicated faculty curriculum committee, to ensure that curricular changes around the campus, both additions and deletions, are incorporated into the lists of eligible courses. In a similar vein, interested students should have a way to determine whether courses listed are actually offered in any given term.

In the area of graduate education and training, similar issues arise regarding what constitutes experience adequate or appropriate for formal recognition of language and area studies expertise. As an example, a Ph.D. candidate in Latin American literature (who is expected to have native or near-native competency in Spanish upon entering the program) might never leave campus while completing the degree, obtaining all research materials from libraries or similar sources. A Ph.D. candidate in entomology might live for two years of full language and cultural immersion at a field research site in Latin America or the Caribbean. Both might be judged eligible for formal graduate certificate in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, but it would be difficult to come up with an arbitrary list of courses or written test of language competency that would appropriately measure that achievement. One way to replace arbitrary and unwieldy numbers of credit hours and test scores, that would accommodate the diversity of experiences implied by this example, is to depend on a CLACS core faculty member on a student’s degree committee to certify the student’s eligibility for formal recognition of LACS competence. However it is determined, we note that the current Graduate Certificate provided by CLACS is informal and does not appear on the student’s official transcript. If the requirements for such certification are worth doing, they are worth being officially recognized by the University. However certification is measured, steps should be taken to ensure that the LACS-focused work of graduate students is “transcriptable.” Again, identifying the general objectives, while implementing flexible ways to achieve them, is key.

Advising

Several undergraduates complained about inadequate advising, claiming that advisors in their major departments often had little knowledge of requirements in minor areas. We bring this point up with some reluctance since we did not gain a clear view of how advising at MSU works. Is it centralized under one administrative structure? Are advisors in a central office, or are they assigned to specific departments and programs? Is there a mechanism for advisors across campus to network and share information? Whatever the structure, we feel obligated to state that complaints about
advising in CLACS and for CLACS programs were frequent enough to justify attention.

Library Resources

We were favorably impressed by the knowledge and commitment Mary Jo Zeter brings to her work as the curator of the Latin American collection. No doubt her competence is one reason that MSU has actually increased its investment in Latin American library resources at a time when other universities are cutting back on both staffing and acquisitions. While by no means one of the largest Latin American collections in North America, MSU’s holdings seem adequate for its programs, particularly when linked to the extensive collections an hour’s drive away at the University of Michigan. Moreover, Ms. Zeter shows a keen eye for building on excellence and identifying niches where bibliographic expertise can be combined with a familiarity with cultural developments in ways that enrich MSU’s Latin American resources—as borne out by her superb collection of artisan books. She also showed herself to be very familiar with the challenges and opportunities now emerging through digital resources. In short, our only recommendation for the library is to keep the good work.

Conclusions

Our overall impression of CLACS was overwhelmingly favorable. The program enjoys committed and imaginative leaders who are ideally suited for the tasks at hand. We were no less impressed by the quality of the faculty and students. We draw special attention to resources in developmental and agricultural economics that make MSU unique among North American universities—resources that publicity about CLACS should highlight. Of course, as stated above, certain elements of CLACS need attention. We emphasize particularly the need for a development strategy that will allow CLACS to develop and grow while making minimal demands on the central university budget. But in general, we were much impressed by what we saw and hope this report can help make strong programs even stronger.

Submitted by:

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