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The Ivory Tower: Higher Education in in American History

10 May 2022

Exploring Latin American Studies

Part I:

What is Latin American Studies?

Latin American Studies is a broad subject that contains a multitude of elements. Latin American Studies departments and programs encapsulate varying themes and topics across many different institutions of Higher Education in the United States. Latin American Studies is a concentration in the region's history and culture as a whole. “The course of study features Latin America's economic, geographic, social and political patterns as well as its problems. With a population nearing half a billion people, Latin America has traditionally been, and is now more than ever, a critical area for the United States.¹” Latin American Studies departments are in many institutions of higher education in the United States today and vary by department size, name, and access to resources. In the early 1950s there were 29 area studies programs at U.S. different universities, by the end of the 1960s there were more than 100 language or area studies programs in total.

¹ “College of International Studies: Department of International and Area Studies,” University of Oklahoma, accessed May 1, 2022, https://www.ou.edu/cis/ias/undergrad-academics/majors/latin_american_studies

Where did Latin American Studies come from?

The Establishment of Latin American Studies:

Following World War II, the United States had a much more keen interest in Latin America due to the potential rise of communism. This idea can be attributed to the Domino Theory, which is the theory that a political event in one country will cause similar events in neighboring countries, like a falling domino causing an entire row of dominoes to fall² (Oxford Dictionary). Historian Jerome Slater asks “would a communist victory in El Salvador lead to a general spread of communism throughout Central America? ...it is at least as important to inquire into whether the domino theory is relevant: would the spread of communism in Central America really threaten American national security or other truly vital interests?”³

In addition to the Domino Theory, another main factor in the development of Latin American Studies was the Cold War. With this increased action and attention, brought intellectual and political themes that expanded into a Latin American Studies program in many institutions to be explored. “Not only did they question the theoretical and political underpinnings of Latin American studies but they applied their analyses in practice, emphasizing field research that brought them into close relationships with the Latin Americans struggling for social change and engaging with Latin American intellectual currents that offered radical alternatives to U.S. mainstream thought.”⁴

² Oxford Dictionary, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

³ Slater Jerome, “Dominos in Central America: Will they fall? Does it Matter?”, *International Security*, Fall, 1987, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall, 1987), pp. 105-134

⁴ Chilcote Ronald, “The Cold War and the Transformation of Latin American Studies in the United States”, *LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES*, Issue 221, Vol. 45 No. 4, July 2018, 6–41

How did Latin American Studies change over time?

Latin American Studies has changed over time given the vastly different political climate of modern times. Latin American studies has grown rapidly around the country. Almost every college website has information on their Latin American Studies department. Initially, Latin American Studies focused on the region of Latin America in relation to the Cold War and the rise of communism globally. Throughout time, Chicano Studies, LatinX Studies, or Latin American Caribbean and LatinX Studies (LACLAS) have been used as names for varying departments and programs around the nation which will be elaborated on later in this paper.

Throughout the course of this area of Study, Latin American Studies has changed due to the vast nature of the topic. This region is large and populated by many different people and cultures. Therefore, as time goes on, there is bound to be even more change in the future of this subject. According to authors Alvarez, Arias, and Hale, in their paper “Revision Latin-American Studies”, they argue that Latin American Studies has benefitted from other programs and help further the area of study⁵. These helpful programs include and have included feminist theory, critical race theory (of both race and ethnicity), other interdisciplinary studies associated with cultural studies, and with the very notion of “Latin America” itself

Part II:

How did Latin American Studies develop and change at Bowdoin College?

⁵ Alvarez Sonia, Arias Arturo, Hale Charles, “Re-Visioning Latin American Studies”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 26, Issue 2, pp. 225-246. Published in 2011 by the American Anthropological Association.

According to the Bowdoin website, Latin American Studies department “fosters a deeper understanding of the diverse cultures and complex historical and contemporary relationships of Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Latinas and Latinos in the United States.” The program is an immersive experience that “supports concerts, theme dinners, film screenings, symposia, service-learning projects, debates, and teach-ins organized by various student organizations, faculty, campus divisions, and neighborhood associations. Every semester speakers who are experts in a field related to the courses being offered—or who are directly involved with social, political, academic, or cultural activities in Latin America—are invited to campus.”⁶ Also, of important note, instead of being called Latin American Studies at Bowdoin, the name has now been officially changed to “Latin American, Caribbean, and LatinX Studies” (LACLAS) in order to be more inclusive of the region as a whole and the many different aspects of religious, cultural, and sociological traditions and practices.

Specifically, at Bowdoin, a student can decide to major or minor in LACLAS. Any Hispanic Studies course taken at Bowdoin also counts toward the distribution requirements for the LACLAS department which is a fairly new change. The major today consists of nine courses with several options. The required courses must be a mix of history, humanities, that focuses on cultural production, one social science course, and an advanced seminar about a broader topic within the entire region to explore.

⁶ Latin American, Caribbean, and LatinX Studies, Bowdoin College Website, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/latin-american-studies/>

Title Changes Over Time:

Since the creation of Latin American Studies, a multitude of names have become associated with this department over time. Latin American studies first became visible with the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War in 1945, when the spread of communism and U.S. security concerns began to shape U.S. policy. Eventually, radicalized Mexican Americans, who called themselves Chicano/a, began a social protest movement in the 1960s and 1970s, eventually creating the field of Chicano/a Studies. The first Chicano studies programs were founded in 1967 at California State College Los Angeles, and 1970 at UT Austin's Center for Mexican American Studies and UCLA's Chicano Research Center respectively. In 1976, the organization voted to change the name to the National Association for Chicano Studies, providing a space for Chicano studies scholars to exchange ideas and share research at its annual conference.

Due to the feminist and queer critiques about the exclusionary nature of Chicano nationalism, National Association for Chicano Studies became NACCS (the National Association of Chicano and Chicana Studies) in 1995 in an attempt to acknowledge and challenge gender discrimination and exclusion. While an integral part of Latino studies, Chicano/a studies remains separate because of (1) the fact that Mexican origin people make up the majority population among Latinos, (2) because it is deeply institutionalized in West Coast, Southwest, and Midwest colleges, universities, and high schools.

Conclusion:

Overall, Latin American Studies is a crucial department in institutions of higher education. Several schools are expanding their programs with the rise in numbers of LatinX students attending college. According to the University of San Diego website, their Latin American Studies program is “designed to help students develop a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the historical, cultural, political, economic and social conditions that have shaped contemporary Latin America.”⁷ As with many other Latin American Studies programs, students are encouraged to articulate “important connections between local and world societies in the context of the Latin American experience; this entails the study of the complex historical formation of this region and its cultural and ethnic diversity, from the foundation of Amerindian civilizations, the European conquest, and the impact of the African slave trade to the challenges of the 21st century.”⁸ All of these departments and programs around the country in varying institutions of higher education are contributing to the overall expansion of this area of study. As this subject continues to grow, more branches will stem from the already blossoming subject of Latin American Studies and continue to shape how crucial Latin America is to learning about the world in a larger and more globalized context.

⁷ “College of Arts and Sciences: Latin American Studies”, University of California San Diego, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.sandiego.edu/cas/latin-american-studies/>

⁸ “College of Arts and Sciences: Latin American Studies”, accessed May 3, 2022.