

Faculty Retreat I: Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) Studies
Evaluation of Academic Programs and Curricula
September 17, 2009

Guiding question: How can we more effectively serve the needs of our students?

- Goals:** (1) Inform about academic programs, requirements and supporting curricula serving undergraduate students in the LAC specialization (or major) and graduate students pursuing a LAC certificate;
- (2) Identify barriers and discuss challenges for better serving students;
- (3) Critically assess and determine priority actions to close curricular gaps;
- (4) Determine mechanisms with appropriate incentives that better engage faculty in skillful mentoring of students; and
- (5) Gather information and document feedbacks from all clientele with LAC interests.

Part of a self-study process also comprising a Seminar Series and external evaluation, this retreat and a second one on 10/22 are intended to help determine future program directions and prospective grant-getting opportunities for the Center.

What Do Our Students Need? What Do We Offer?

Undergraduate Programs:

The specialization in LAC studies is a multidisciplinary program of the College of Social Science. It requires 24 credits plus to two years of language studies (Spanish, Portuguese or other language of the Americas). The Center's undergraduate coordinator currently advises 124 students in the specialization—predominantly from Arts and Letters, Social Science and James Madison College—the largest enrollment among the universities' area studies programs. Since 2006-07 about 45 students annually graduate with a LAC specialization.

Issues arising in this session centered on the following themes:

- Given its relatively high enrollment, which are the incentives for students to pursue the specialization?
- How could students from other majors and colleges be attracted to the specialization or major?
- How can barriers be lowered to encourage greater participation to improve cultural competency (reduce ethnocentricity) and global citizenship?
- There is need to re-think existing requirements (e.g., too many credits are required; incorporate language proficiency model; emphasize quality and types of experiences in lieu of a credit-laden model; better evaluate how much students are learning and applying what they have learned; improve global competencies through an expanded portfolio of opportunities also including service learning, internships, field research placements)

- How should we better market offerings to students? (e.g., clearly state learning outcomes; demonstrate global empowerment from the program in personal, professional and academic terms.)

Potential actions: (1) reduce coursework requirement to 15 credits; (2) count towards the requirement courses with significant LAC content (but less than the current restriction of 100%) from across the university; (3) require language proficiency to achieve individualized objectives without an arbitrary credit minimum*; (4) require credit-bearing LAC experiential or service learning abroad or service learning activity in the LAC diasporas; and (5) encourage multiple experiential, service learning episodes or research endeavors abroad, making this a funding priority.

[*While *measuring* language proficiency may not yet be broadly available and reliable for massive use, the desired outcome is the learner's ability to interact with native speakers with sufficient ease to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers that otherwise hamper effective communication. This standard is empirical and can be unambiguously ascertained.]

Graduate Program:

The Center offers a Graduate Certificate in LAC studies. Requirements include: (1) language competency based on coursework credit minima; (2) 16 credits of LAC-related coursework; and (3) a significant written work on LAC. Currently, 59 graduate students are enrolled. Emerging issues were:

- The certificate is unofficial (not “transcript-able”); it is provided by the Center. Should the “certificate” be replaced with a graduate specialization yielding a more valuable skill set for students?
- There is need to identify the graduate courses with LAC content. Unlike the specialization, few courses contain LAC in the title, except those taught by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. Should we consider developing a Master's degree program in LAC studies?
- Funding graduate research and language training is essential, e.g., FLAS and Tinker Field Research Grants. New funding sources are needed to attract more students and faculty mentors.
- How should the connection be fortified between the Center and graduate students from LAC?
- **Potential actions: certificate in LAC studies:** (1) assess language competency ignoring arbitrary credit restrictions; (2) eliminate arbitrary 16-credit coursework requirement, substituting it with (3) required committee member from LAC core faculty who would guide LAC experience and content in accordance with student objectives and to assess (4) a required chapter or major thesis section targeting LAC content or application.

Chicano Latino Studies Program (CLS)

The Chicano-centered CLS program offers an undergraduate specialization (about 55 students are currently enrolled; about 1/3 graduating with specialization) and a doctoral program (eleven students). The CLS is in a transitional period, setting priorities for academic programs (e.g., content, curricula, progress, outcomes) and better integrating student service-related activities with the academic mission. Emerging issues and questions were:

- How best can we foster collaboration between CLS and the Center? Which are the most fruitful thematic intersections (e.g., migration, trans-nationalism, remittances)?
- CLS could benefit by incorporating a greater pan-Latino emphasis.
- The Center and CLS should collaborate in promoting and developing courses and co-sponsored events, especially because of faculty overlap between programs.
- Should CLS undergo curricular changes to be more inclusive of Latino/Latin American themes?

Identifying the Curricular Gaps: Which Priority Actions?

In response to a structural need, UISFL funding was instrumental in developing the major in Global and Area Studies with a Latin American concentration. This action responded to a structural gap. A second award was obtained to fill curricular gaps in support of the new major and to develop Portuguese language instruction, and to bridge to professional schools with LAC offerings. Identified gaps were:

- *Fundamental problem.* Area and thematic studies programs (under International Studies and Programs) cannot offer their “own” courses or academic fields of study (although the Environmental Science and Policy Program was invited to do so 6 yr ago with high-level administrative support).
Potential resolution: find ways to cross-list (and negotiate content of) key courses with LAC content.
- *Overlooked opportunities.* There is keen need to equip students to deal with cultural awareness and diversity in the US. Actions could include revised curricula to focus on Latin American/Caribbean content while also fulfilling integrative studies requirements (e.g., Freshman Seminars, Honors/Research Seminars, general education/ integrative studies in arts and humanities; and integrative studies in social science)
- *The Caribbean.* There is a notable gap in course offerings focusing on the Caribbean, especially English-speaking countries, a need that merits attention. New courses focusing on the diasporas are needed (e.g., Asian, African, English and French Caribbean), which could also tie into and with other area and thematic studies programs.
- *Language.* Review and revision is urgently needed in the undergraduate curriculum in Spanish. It is too passive-learning oriented, focusing on traditional, literature-oriented and outdated learning materials. Skill sets and language and cultural competencies of students are insufficient for domestic (e.g., public school teaching) and international markets. The curriculum requires enrichment for broader cultural diversity (less ethnocentrism).
- Spanish language instruction is too classroom-based and textbook-oriented. Emphasis is needed on more interactive mechanisms by incorporating active (experiential and service-oriented) learning opportunities into the curriculum.
- A priority need is to incorporate into the curriculum language diversity of the Americas (e.g., indigenous, Anglophone, Francophone, and Caribbean languages).
- Michigan State possesses comparative advantages in professional schools and land grant colleges. These constitute foci for institutional distinction compared to peer institutions in effectively arguing for external funding support.
- MSU possesses various strengths, including the health continuum from landscape elements to epidemiology and health-related disciplines with several foundation-funded projects and award-winning research training programs.

- More technology should be incorporated into the teaching curriculum, including Portuguese instruction (e.g., online and hybrid components; course sharing with other institutions, such as the University of Michigan).
- Significant gaps may also exist in social science offerings.

Experiential Learning: Working Together to Pursue our Passions

Study Abroad

The Office of Study Abroad offers a variety of models (based on time abroad and direct enrollment; language/cultural immersion; specific academic content). Currently, there are 36 programs in LAC with costs that are generally less than for other regions. Most programs are faculty-led, short-term, and topically-focused. Issues identified included:

- Quality issues meriting attention include needs for (1) more adequate pre-departure preparation, (2) better-specified learning objectives with a clear itinerary of activities during the international experience, (3) pedagogical design, including post-trip closure of the field learning experience, and (4) embedded programs.
- What are reasonable evaluation methods and expectations for assessing/evaluating learning outcomes and efficacy of experiential learning programs?
- In response to the 2007 admonition to US universities by the Modern Language Association, how can we better prepare students and better conduct Michigan State study abroad experiences to avoid unanticipated outcomes with students returning home with views that are yet more culturally insensitive and ethnocentric than before their travel? Effectively constituting and facilitating a viable group dynamic is likely to be an important component of this enterprise. Facilitating peer learning by mixing undergraduate and graduate students is a goal.
- Exemplary new programs in Peru and Nicaragua were presented and discussed by Professors Irv Widders and Dan Kramer. These focused on experiential learning (e.g., service learning, undergraduate research opportunities abroad) through community engagement, problem articulation and problem-solving, integrated judgment skills, language and cultural immersion, and the development of global citizenship attitudes. These programs—like the new two-course Experience Latin America package in Chiapas, Mexico—incorporate extensive pre-trip preparation, defined field learning objectives, and re-entry follow-up and academic assignments that help bring the experience to appropriate closure.
- **Potential action.** Designate a choice set of most recommendable experiential learning options. Encourage students to participate through a multi-episodic experiential portfolio. (James Madison College requires a 12-credit internship/field experience for its graduates.)

Aligning Faculty Incentives to Better Serve Our Students

The following issues and questions were raised and discussed:

- How can we provide more individualized attention to students in dynamic learning settings?

- How could we better engage faculty for more effective student mentoring? (i.e., where students consult designated professors in their department about LAC enrichments to their degree program or for specialization)
- Which faculty incentives would help ensure this outcome? Which advising model could be utilized (e.g., James Madison)?
- How can we better connect UG students to faculty research projects/labs?
- **Potential actions:** Discuss with deans and department chairs (1) the appointment of faculty LAC advisors in their colleges and (2) the identification of faculty mentors of research experiences that incorporate LAC and other international issues. Include in the spring interdisciplinary conference a session featuring student presentations of faculty-mentored experiential learning outcomes.