

# Bridging Latin American and Latino Studies

## *Juntos pero no revueltos*

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Thanks to Pedro Cabán and Frances Aparicio for raising very pertinent questions about the need to spell out the “terms of engagement” between Latin American and Latino Studies. The fact that both Latino studies and Latin American studies traditions are interdisciplinary and focus centrally on culture, history, language and identity is necessary but far from sufficient for synergy.

This invited comment briefly shares some our experience at the University of California at Santa Cruz. We have followed just one of many possible niche strategies, and seek to learn from other approaches. Our central lesson, emerging from years of collective discussions, is that the LALS project here does not involve a homogenizing process of merger or fusion, nor does it try to incorporate one field into another. Instead, our approach to building this new field involves the conceptual *bridging* of two interlocking intellectual traditions.

The first key moment at UCSC was a decade ago, when the Chicano/Latino Research Center was launched to focus on “cross-border perspectives linking the Americas.” See <[www.lals.ucsc.edu/clrc](http://www.lals.ucsc.edu/clrc)>. This innovation permitted the broadening of UCSC’s existing Latin American Studies program into Latin American and Latino Studies, led by a coalition of faculty from both traditions. Two tenured faculty were recruited in 1995 as part of a medium-term strategy to turn the LALS program into a full department. By the time we gained department status in early 2001, we were graduating more than 50 majors each year with six a half ladder faculty (including five and a half full professors) as well as two full-time senior lecturers. Department status meant full self-governance, institutional security and symbolic commitment from the university. This critical mass helped to offset the risks that Frances and Pedro rightly point out. Along the way, our process was facilitated internally by an emphasis on methodological pluralism and intellectual balance—not only between faculty originally trained in the Latino and Latin American studies traditions, but also between the humanities and social sciences.

In an effort to encourage meaningful “intellectual dual citizenship,” we also have 13 “participating faculty”—professors based in a wide range of other departments who have full voting rights in LALS on key issues like new hires and curriculum. This governance structure goes beyond merely symbolic affiliation or consultation; it involves real power-sharing. This governance structure reflects our department’s commitment, together with CLRC, to support LALS-related research and teaching *throughout* the university. For example, we are wary of any hint that larger disciplinary departments might try to offload their need to hire specialists in Latino or Latin American studies.

Institutional commitment from higher-ups has been fundamental. Our university administration supported the building of LALS not as part of any cost-cutting effort, but because allies take being a public university seriously. They supported our view that building LALS was a contribution to making the university more accountable to the peoples of California.

Faculty bolstered this approach by informing our agenda through multiple partnerships with public interest groups and grassroots organizations active in Latino and Latin American communities, such as our Summer Institute on social change across borders <[http://lals.ucsc.edu/summer\\_institute/](http://lals.ucsc.edu/summer_institute/)>. For another example, we recently convened a conference on building bridges between researchers (broadly defined) and leaders of indigenous Mexican migrant communities in the United States—inspired by the social and cultural construction of “Oaxacalifornia” <[www.lals.ucsc.edu/conference](http://www.lals.ucsc.edu/conference/)>. In the process, we have tried to transcend the usual divide between scholarly research and public/community service.

Our research center and academic department have also worked together to sustain both the conceptual and action-research conversations through a collective multi-year Hemispheric Dialogues project, which has increasingly focused on the need for more explicit “conceptual translations” across intellectual traditions <[http://lals.ucsc.edu/hemispheric\\_dialogues/](http://lals.ucsc.edu/hemispheric_dialogues/)>. The idea of “conceptual translations” refers to our recognition that bringing the two approaches together, even in the same language, does not guarantee mutual understanding. The intellectual whole is more likely to be greater than the sum of the parts if we explicitly problematize the often different ways in which we are defining and applying our key concepts. At UCSC this conversation has gone furthest in the context of dialogue between Latina and Latin American feminist scholars.

To sum up, LALS is a field, not a discipline—it is an intellectual response to the dramatic pace at which people, ideas, cultural expressions, capital and political actors move back and forth between the United States and Latin America, including the growing bilingual and multicultural arenas within U.S. society. In this context, LALS creates a space for developing conceptual frameworks that meet the challenge of understanding the rapidly changing interaction between Latino and Latin America, as we recognize that one cannot be understood without the other. Rather than merging area and ethnic studies, we are encouraging dialogue between Latin American and Latino experiences—both scholarly and as actually lived. LALS emerges at this intersection, a field still very much under construction.