Latin American and Latino Studies

The study of the Latin American region of the world as a profession for American scholars began well over 100 years ago. However, be it by proximity, by a shared heritage of differing degrees, or a combination of those and other factors, this region has, since the birth of our nation, never failed to be of interest to researchers, policy makers, and businesses in the United States. At no time during our past has this been truer than at present. With the dawn of the newest globalization age, having been ushered in by the end of the Cold War and marked by increased and more highly developed technological and economic integration among states, the common bonds between Latin Americans and the United States have never been stronger.

The issues that now affect both regions as a whole are numerous and very relevant to our nation’s future prosperity. Environmental degradation and preservation, political stability and activity, trade policies, public opinion, special interest groups, and military cooperation are but a few of the traditional issues that have been amplified because of increased social and economic integration, with the one, economic integration, facilitating the other, social integration. The one that most intrigues me, however, and indeed the one that has led me to this chosen path of seeking a Bachelor of Arts degree in Latin American and Latino Studies, is that of social movement and social and cultural integration. For me, these involve migration, its causes as well as its effects, as seen from both sides of the border, wherever that border may be.
Latinos are now the largest minority group in the United States. As has been poignantly documented by Ruben Martinez in his book *Crossing Over*, many of them are willing to endure tremendous hardships and risk their lives to become integrated into the US economy, in particular, the US mindset of amassing wealth in order to consume more. But of more interest to me, and I would argue ultimately the most substantial result of this unprecedented and concentrated migration to the United States by Latinos, is the degree to which cultures and civilizations, rather than entirely assimilating into “Western Culture”, will be blended so that aspects of Latin Culture will be more present, and perhaps even prevail, in the United States in the years to come.

My family is of Anglo heritage and has resided in the United States for over 150 years, similar to an overwhelming majority of families in the United States. Yet my daughter will be the first member of our family to speak Spanish fluently, the first to have Latinos as peers in our hometown of Indianapolis, and the first to pass the recipe for Sancocho to her daughter. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this fact is that my peers report similar sentiments, similar experiences, and, most important of all, similar attitudes. Again, for me, these are the quintessential reasons why every aspect of the Latin American region and Latino culture is worthy of the most methodical and sincere study, because more and more, their culture is our own. Traditionally, this has been true only in select regions of the United States, namely those areas formerly controlled by Spain or Mexico. It is my contention, however, that globalization and its integrating effect are making this true for more and more areas within our
country, including Indianapolis. Practically speaking, our society is changing. The challenge for us is to properly recognize how it is changing and to ensure that our social and political institutions evolve so that they are representative of the people.

My major was designed to set about accomplishing this task. It is a well crafted, perceived, and balanced study of the primary areas of US/Latin American relations and Latino Studies. Included in the program are two advanced level courses each from the departments of Geography, Spanish, Political Science, and History. From the experience of studying under the highly competent individuals within these and other departments has been born a program rich in academic diversity that demands intensive thought about and research of every major topic area regarding Latin American and Latino Studies.

What is unique about my plan, and the reason that it will be an invaluable asset to me in the future, is that it combines the traditional focus and original motivation for the study of Latin America and Latinos, foreign policy and inter-state relations, with the more modern concentration on the region and its people as actors in American domestic politics through social and economic integration and mass population shifts to the United States.

According to Mark Berger in his book Under Northern Eyes, “the very existence of Latin American studies flowed from US hegemony in Latin America, and Latin American specialists have always been implicitly, if not explicitly, involved in the analysis and formulation of US Foreign Policy.” (Berger 156) Indeed the history and nature of the discipline can be traced to the 19th century.
Practically speaking, however, it was a product of the Cold War’s battle of ideologies and was undertaken in earnest during and after World War II. This was a time when every region on earth was important and with which at least implicit cooperation and mutual agreement on political systems was essential. This was undoubtedly truer for the region of Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine, which was produced in the middle of the 19th century and essentially informed Europe that all of the Western Hemisphere was within the sphere of influence of the United States and only the United States, not to be encroached upon by other world powers, was unofficially reasserted during the Cold War. Correspondingly, the US government encouraged and promoted advanced study of the region.

In the post-Cold War era, however, this serves as a limited definition at best. The Western world has won the battle of ideologies and, as a result, the world is becoming more integrated, with a freer flow of people, their capital, and their ideas. In the US, Latinos are leading the way with regard to this issue. Thus, the new challenge for Latin American and Latino Studies specialists is to forge an understanding of how our society is evolving because of this social, political, and economic interconnectedness.

My goal is to take up this challenge. With a Bachelor’s degree in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, I intend to pursue graduate study in Public History here at IUPUI with a focus on the influence of Latin Americans. As a historian, I understand that I will be charged not only with gathering or recording facts, but also with interpreting their importance in a larger context. I can imagine
no better tool for my future endeavors than the ability to interpret facts about Latin Americans in the United States with a keen understanding of both perspectives.

Works Cited