

The Latin Americanist Research Resources Project: A New Direction for Monographic Cooperation?

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Some 35 of the nation's premier Latin American collections have for the past several years worked together in the Latin Americanist Research Resources Project, an endeavor sponsored jointly by the Association of American Universities, the Association of Research Libraries, and the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials. The effort had its origins in the common concern of scholars, librarians, and academic administrators to ensure the continued availability of international resources in North American libraries as acquisition funds became ever more constrained. Library budgets had for some time been under pressure, and foreign acquisitions appeared particularly vulnerable to cutbacks.

From the first, the Project's goals were thus cast along the twin (and not obviously compatible) dimensions of strengthened coverage of foreign publications and minimized costs. The Latin Americanist Project's highly visible institutional sponsors, the tangible support provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and significant contributions from each participating library all attest to the broad constituency that continues to share these objectives.

Background and Goals

The Latin Americanist endeavor began early in 1995, with three pilot efforts that focused on serials, government documents, and the publications of non-governmental organizations. With these measures fairly well in place, and with a deepening understanding of cooperative costs and benefits, the project has recently moved toward activities that may have a more forceful impact on participants' budgets and collections. A joint effort to improve our coverage of the region's monographic output has thus become a central concern.

Preliminary studies to the Latin Americanist Project's "pilot" phase suggested an emerging monographic collecting pattern for non-core materials that combined unnecessary duplication with disquieting gaps.¹ Ever-tighter acquisitions budgets, the region's expanding publishing output, and spiraling prices suggested that the situation would worsen with time. Thus, the prospect was at best a stable roster of libraries sustaining basic Latin American core collections, along with a shrinking group of institutions constructing increasingly duplicative collections of more esoteric publications. The obvious yet unhappy result would be an ever-weaker resource base for Latin American Studies.

The monographic component of the Latin Americanist Project has therefore sought to structure a cooperative program that builds on existing efforts to ensure strong, distributed collections. This also recognizes the long history of cooperative initiatives that have fallen short of expectations. Many in the library community are by now deeply skeptical of cooperation, and any new program must address the aspects that have proven problematic in the past.

The Terms of Participation

The Latin Americanist Project calls for each participating library to re-direct seven percent of its monographic allocation for materials from Latin America toward a specific, pre-arranged collecting area. Each library's project acquisitions will thus be funded by its previous base amount for the target

area, plus an additional seven percent of its Latin American monographic budget. Acquisitions can focus on a country, a group of countries, a subject area, or a subject area from a particular country. Libraries received their collecting assignments by first listing (in priority order) no more than three areas upon which they might focus. These choices were posted to the group as a whole, along with the amount that each library will spend on its proposed target area. A process of voluntary, participant-driven fine-tuning ensued. Early results indicate that each library has been able to retain a high-priority assignment within a minimally duplicative collecting grid.

Participants are free to manage the seven percent reallocations through whatever shifts most readily accommodate local programs and demand. All participants are also expected and encouraged to maintain their core collections, since the project focuses on publications likely to receive only occasional use. Each library can acquire materials from its target area as it best sees fit: firm orders, approval plans, collecting agents, expanded exchanges, buying trips, or other strategies. Intensified purchases will normally predominate, though complementary efforts will often be needed as well. Flexible start-up dates recognize participants' different fiscal years, acquisitions arrangements, and decision-making processes.

Participating libraries are expected to keep basic statistics on the amounts they spend for project materials and on the number of project titles they order and receive. Timely (though not necessarily "rush") bibliographic control is required, preferably through catalog records provided to one of the major bibliographic utilities. Most project materials, except those items too fragile, valuable, or heavily consulted to send off-site, are expected to be available through interlibrary loan. These conditions should allow us to monitor the project, evaluate its results, and ensure broad access to project holdings.

Changing Contexts and the Context for Change

The terms for the monographic project combine some prescription with as much flexibility as possible. The project also relies on some fundamental characteristics of today's library infrastructure. First and foremost, automated bibliographic control is by now almost universal. Arrangements to build distributed collections can thus be based upon and evaluated with solid knowledge of the specific titles held at other institutions, rather than the inevitably fuzzy statements of collecting intentions that have prevailed in the past.

A second feature of today's library derives from some of the benefits of automated bibliographic control. We now generally accept that none of our libraries can acquire everything its users may need. Ensuring access to outside resources is thus a central concern. The project itself addresses the obvious requirement that any given item must be held at some library before another institution can rely on remote access instead of local acquisition. A second element centers on the logistics of loans, and is best manifested in the continuing efforts to make interlibrary loan and document delivery cheaper and more reliable. As interlibrary loan costs are driven down, price calculations for the balance between access and ownership will tilt more and more toward the former.

The effects of automated bibliographic control and efficient ILL and document delivery should be similar across almost all collections and libraries. The Latin American monographic effort, however, enjoys two special advantages. First, this project draws upon the Latin Americanist library community's long and strongly cooperative history. The familiarity and trust achieved through years of meeting and working together have created a solid foundation for our experiments.

Second, and in part flowing from this collaborative past, the Latin Americanist endeavor has been able

to enlist a critical mass of participants. Financial contributions and outside support have been equally important.² Organizing a complex, multi-institutional endeavor is time-consuming and expensive, and the initial pay-offs can be small. A fully engaged community is crucial to overcoming both administrative and financial hurdles.

Exorcising the Past

Cooperative collection development commonly brings to mind experiences like the Farmington Plan or the Research Libraries Group Conspectus. Both have been (perhaps prematurely) dismissed as failures, and both entailed fairly massive infrastructures for administration and publicity. Skepticism has become the norm. The Latin Americanist Project has taken shape in full awareness of these precedents. On one hand, and as suggested above, automated bibliographic control and improving systems for access and document delivery have shifted the technological context for cooperation in ways that now make it vastly more simple to know about and consult what is available. Other essential features, built into the project itself, focus on process, psychology, and expectations.

1. The project, first and foremost, has been constructed to guarantee benefits for each participant while at the same time helping the group as a whole. Collecting assignments are therefore intended to reinforce existing priorities within each library, and participants have as a rule requested assignments that reflect both their capabilities and their strengths. Some libraries have thus proposed fairly narrow targets while others, whose collections cover a broader range, have been more inclusive. In either case, the choices address local aspirations and concerns.
 2. While the project's goal is to improve Latin American coverage, it does not promise comprehensive acquisitions. Most requests for collecting assignments have come from libraries seeking to build on their strengths. Cornell University, for example, has for decades collected very heavily from Peru. The seven percent reallocation may allow Cornell to mount special efforts to ferret out provincial publications, documents, ephemera, and materials from non-governmental organizations, thereby edging its Peruvian acquisitions even closer to the exhaustive. Libraries signing up for such large countries as Mexico or Brazil, by contrast, are almost certainly falling well short of complete coverage. Project reallocations will strengthen their holdings, but there will still be plenty of room for growth.
- Just as the project does not demand exhaustive acquisitions by its participating libraries, neither does it expect to cover every country within the region. We anticipate fewer and fewer gaps as the roster of participants continues to grow, but assignments will not be imposed simply to round out the list.
3. Wherever possible, the project encourages flexibility and voluntary compliance over regimentation or prescription. For instance, accounting systems vary drastically, and some libraries cannot track their purchases by country. Their best estimates are accepted, though improved reports are also encouraged. As with other aspects, the guiding principle is to construct a project that works for each participant, as well as for the group as a whole.
 4. The project encourages regional as well as North American specialization. Regional consortia for the Northeast, the Southeast, and California have recently emerged within the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), and others may follow. Libraries within each of these groupings are working together to improve their overall coverage. These programs buttress efforts with a national and bi-national focus. They can also give cooperation an immediate and personal meaning, for instance as bibliographers meet face-to-face to negotiate, evaluate, and clarify their arrangements

5. The monographs project has phrased its requirements in simple terms and has then been flexible in

interpreting them. Each library has a great deal of latitude in deciding how it will participate. A volunteer "Working Group" provides advice on specific collecting choices and broader matters of policy. All the project's bibliographers routinely contribute to our discussions. This reflects our goals of flexibility and broad involvement. It also demonstrates the project's insistence on non-bureaucratic arrangements that carry the smallest possible amount of administrative overhead. Our monographic effort cannot cost more than it saves.³

Evaluating Project Results

Studies conducted before the overall Project began indicated a pattern of gradually shrinking and increasingly duplicative Latin American collections. The gaps in coverage also seemed fairly consistent. While the monographic effort offers a logical response to these trends, only careful evaluation will reveal whether it actually makes a difference. Several measures will be especially important.

1. The project presumes that distributed acquisitions based on coordinated collecting assignments will strengthen overall coverage both nationally and regionally. Will this happen, or are we merely engaged in a gigantic reshuffling of our current acquisitions?

Perhaps the simplest test will entail analysis of Latin American holdings by country and by year of publication on the OCLC and RLIN bibliographic databases. If the project works as planned, an ever greater share of Latin American imprints will be held at only a small number of libraries. Several complexities will (inevitably) intervene. Past studies suggest that it can take as long as five years for Latin American acquisitions to be represented in online catalog records. Even with participants' prompt cataloging of project titles, we cannot be certain of the full extent of North American acquisitions until several years after any given publication date.

Were book prices constant, we could expect the project's seven percent reallocations to increase the number of titles that each library receives from its target area. However, book prices shift (usually upward), and publishing output ebbs and flows. Tallies of receipts must be interpreted with care.

2. Convincing analyses of holdings and receipts will require several years and very careful interpretation. Before and after expenditure figures for each participant's target area should provide a quicker indication of both project impact and local compliance. Local accounting structures and financial systems, however, mean that some libraries will be unable to provide clearcut spending breakdowns. Time lags between orders and receipts, and the vagaries of international shipping (and therefore invoice payments), can also produce short-term distortions that are best addressed by relying on multi-year rolling averages.

3. Tallies of amounts spent and titles received will provide two quantitative measures of the project's impact. A complementary approach could focus on borrowing requests and interlibrary loan. Intensified interlibrary loan traffic might be expected as our local collections become deeper but less broad.

As before, the results will require careful interpretation. At the simplest level, it is difficult to track interlibrary loan transactions in terms of the categories (country and year of publication) that make sense for this project. Samples or case studies from a few participants may at least suggest trends. Even then, interlibrary loan traffic only reflects current demand. These figures may bear little or no relationship to the project's long-term goal of improving our overall access to little-used materials.

4. Measuring growth in coverage, reductions in duplication, expenditure trends, and patterns of interlibrary loan will suggest some of our project's tangible costs and benefits. A fuller analysis is

needed to assess a broader range of costs in both the short and the long terms, as the impact of specialized acquisitions reverberates through the entire library structure. The following four examples may suggest some of the dimensions.

Libraries owning North America's only copy of a particular title carry an uncodified but nonetheless very real responsibility to preserve that item. If the project works as planned, we will see more and more titles that are very thinly held. How will the project affect each participant's preservation costs?

Priority cataloging for project materials, even to provide less than full records, may shift local processing balances away from copy cataloging and toward (more expensive) original work.

Participating libraries, in volunteering for collecting assignments, are normally reinforcing their acquisitions in areas of high local interest. Strengthened holdings of these locally significant materials may simultaneously expand the library's reliance on outside collections for more peripheral areas. Interlibrary loan requests may increase, with all the associated expense.

The pricing and profit calculations of Latin American bookdealers presume a particular balance between works purchased by many libraries and those bought by only a few. The dwindling acquisitions budgets forecast before the project began would have put pressure on vendor profits and prices. The project may accelerate the process. Its impact on prices is hard to predict.

A complete cost accounting may thus reveal project trade-offs that are not immediately apparent. Throughout the process, it will be important to recall that the project's expected benefits are not exclusively economic.

5. The project may have already had a real, albeit somewhat intangible, impact on its participants' specialist staff. One of the trends that provoked the entire effort was a seemingly inexorable decline in our Latin American coverage. The prospects pointed to dwindling collections, and also to an endangered specialization within librarianship. The project has mobilized librarians (among others) to turn the tide. An energized constituency has resulted, as manifested in a reinforced willingness to work together and new avenues for cooperation.

Specialized acquisitions also suggest that local librarians will become ever more expert in particular collecting areas and their publications, thereby (perhaps) counteracting a trend toward part-time area studies positions that blend in ever broader generalist responsibilities. Interviews and/or questionnaires may provide the best means for establishing the project's effect on bibliographers' mood, morale, and job assignments.

Moving Ahead

A final dimension of evaluation shades into speculation on whether, and how, other approaches might accomplish more, and the related aspect of how we can improve our results. A number of issues have already surfaced.

Past Specializations and Project Reallocations

The monograph project has injected its demands for specialization and cooperation into a universe of Latin American collections that has evolved organically over time. Many participating libraries have sought across-the-board collections, but some were already specializing when the project began. Tulane University, for instance, has for decades focused on Central America; the University of Florida at

Gainesville emphasizes the Caribbean. In these and similar cases, libraries were fulfilling some of the expectations of a cooperative, distributed acquisition program even before the project began.

The project's response to this circumstance has taken two directions. Pre-existing specialized collections were constructed to meet local needs. In the absence of regional or national cooperative plans, these libraries have been obliged to provide general Latin American coverage while also pursuing their specialty. As our project creates a more dense network of interdependent collections, these libraries stand to benefit along with the rest of us: past specialization does not preclude current benefit.

The second response has to do with pragmatics and politics. Even as we expect positive results, the monograph project is best seen as an experiment to test whether voluntary, targeted budget reallocations can improve joint access to Latin American research materials. If would-be participants cite pre-existing specializations in order to exempt themselves from internal reallocations, then the project will have nothing to test. We have thus insisted on distinguishing between today's richly contoured map of Latin American collection strengths, and the impact that project reallocations will have in creating an even more varied map in the future.

The Role of Consortia

A somewhat related issue involves the role of consortia as project participants. Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University, have long-standing bilateral arrangements through which libraries located close to one another are in essence building a single, broad-based Latin American collection between them. Other consortia, for example a grouping of academic libraries in New York City, have explored similar arrangements in (usually) less formal and less encompassing terms. The already mentioned regional consortia within SALALM could come to do the same.

The project has thus far addressed questions of consortia on a case-by-case basis. With bilateral consortia, the project has accommodated either independent project participation by each member library or joint participation by both members acting as one. Larger consortia have been perceived as cooperative groups that complement the project's efforts. Therefore, any of their monographic endeavors are perceived more as supplementing than as superseding the project's activities. Since our goals acknowledge specialization at regional as well as national levels, overlap should cause no problem.

Matching Cooperative Contributions to Institutional Strengths

The monographic project is based on voluntary participation by libraries that enrolled in the full AAU/ARL/SALALM Project. Almost all major Latin American collections have signed on, and the participants also include some libraries whose Latin American efforts are small. It is not yet clear whether the monographs project would have a greater impact on our aggregate holdings by limiting participation to libraries meeting some threshold of collection size or budget. The many trade-offs include the resource depth gained from broad participation versus the energy dissipated as the core group grows larger and more complex. Moreover, some research libraries whose Latin American collections are relatively small may be building more aggressively in other subjects or areas. One eventual means to recognize all potential cooperative contributions might emerge if this project's reallocation model were broadened to a wider range of collecting areas, so that all participating institutions could specialize in their strengths.

Finding Optimal Terms for Cooperation

The monograph project is only now beginning, and the initial participants will continue to phase in their efforts throughout this first year. Thus, it will be some time before we can assess whether the model increases overall access to Latin American imprints. If seven percent reallocations have a positive effect, would larger reallocations accomplish even more? Is there a reallocation limit beyond which cooperative benefits fall off? Is there some amount that all libraries must devote to "core" acquisitions to provide materials used so frequently that the costs of borrowing would exceed those of purchase, local shelving, and circulation? Are all libraries the same in this respect? Complete cost models should provide some of the answers.

Consortial Cost-Savings and Added Value Initiatives

The Latin Americanist Project as a whole has, to date, emphasized a continuing effort to increase Latin American serials coverage through an evolving system of distributed subscription assignments, a table of contents database, and a mechanism for expedited interlibrary loan. One early conclusion is that this sort of effort, at once narrow and focused on adding value to our holdings, is expensive to coordinate and sustain. However, the monographic exercise may eventually become sufficiently large and efficient to generate cost savings and also ensure enhanced coverage. As the evaluation section's cost discussion suggests, we now lack even a conceptual basis for identifying this point. Nonetheless, there may be some level at which monographic savings could be diverted to support other cooperative efforts that carry higher intrinsic costs or that add new value.

Improving Bibliographic Access For Distributed Collections

The project supposes increased reliance on interlibrary loan as distributed collections become the norm. Online bibliographic databases enable users to locate specific off-site materials quickly and certainly. However, a great deal of research relies on browsing and on very brief inspections of previously identified materials to see whether they merit closer attention. On-line catalog records work well for researchers seeking specific items. They are less effective for those attempting to become familiar with a literature or to browse some fairly large category of materials.

The project, as it redistributes and expands Latin American holdings, will force some users to substitute remote access for on-site browsing. The shift might work best if researchers enjoyed a better means to assess materials held off-site. Travel grants and other visiting arrangements can at best help only a few. Another approach might seek to enrich the information about research resources that is available online. We might, for instance, scan title pages, tables of contents, front matter, and indexes, and link these files to traditional bibliographic records. Users could use these to get a quick sense of a particular work online as a means of deciding whether to request it via interlibrary loan.

This approach would enhance the value of traditional cataloging records. It could refine user demands on interlibrary loan, enabling books to find their full external audience and helping scholars locate the materials they require. In the long run, distributed collections both allow and require improved access. Re-thinking how we provide this access will become increasingly important.

Conclusion

The Latin Americanist Research Resources Project, as it ventures into a cooperative program to create distributed monographic collections, has grappled with issues common to all cooperative endeavors. It has also addressed questions particular to this field. It is still too early to declare our monographic effort a success, and one of the project's central tenets is that we will have to adapt constantly as the program matures. The model may nonetheless suggest possibilities for other collecting fields and consortia.

1. Many of these studies are mentioned in Jutta Reed-Scott, *Scholarship, Research Libraries, and Global Publishing*, (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1996).
2. Each participant library has paid a \$3,000 fee to help cover the Project's overhead and expenses.
3. Cooperation, of course, can also offer the best means to accomplish goals well beyond the capacity of any participant. These may entail entirely new costs. One eventual result of monographic cooperation might be an increased potential to address such "added value" efforts within the Latin American realm.

Latin Americanist Research Resources Project Participating Libraries

- University of Arizona
- Brigham Young University
- University of California - Berkeley
- University of California - Los Angeles
- University of California - San Diego
- University of California - Santa Barbara
- Center for Research Libraries
- Columbia University
- University of Connecticut
- Cornell University
- Duke University
- University of Florida
- Harvard University
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- University of Kansas
- Library of Congress
- University of Miami
- University of Minnesota
- National Agricultural Library
- University of New Mexico
- New York Public Library
- New York University
- University of North Carolina
- University of Notre Dame
- University of Pennsylvania
- University of Pittsburgh
- Princeton University
- University of Southern California
- Syracuse University
- University of Texas
- University of Toronto
- Tulane University
- Vanderbilt University
- University of Wisconsin
- Yale University

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