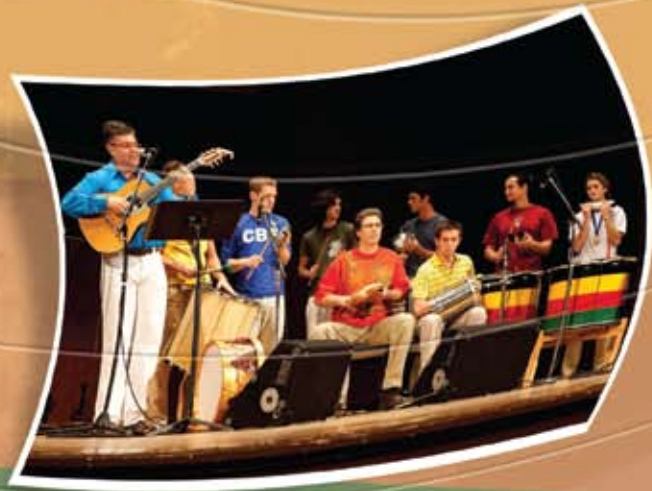


Rhythms of the



Region

BY CLAUDIA ADRIEN



UF's Center for Latin American Studies continues its long history of research and outreach in the Americas



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IGHT DECADES AFTER THE University of Florida established the first academic research program in the United States focused exclusively on Latin America, UF continues to be a national leader in studying this vital economic and social region.

“While the problems confronting Latin America and hemispheric relations have changed over these eight decades — from the need for a Good Neighbor Policy in the 1930s to current debates over free-trade agreements, global warming and immigration — the UF Center for Latin American Studies continues to be at the forefront of anticipating tomorrow’s challenges,” says former center Director Carmen Deere.

After eight years as U.S. Commissioner of Education, John J. Tigert was well aware of Washington’s interest in foreign affairs when he became UF’s president in 1928. Seeing an opportunity to gain some national recognition for his institution, Tigert established the Institute for Inter-American Affairs in 1930 and in February 1931 the institute’s inaugural conference included dedication of the Plaza of the Americas and the planting of 21 oak trees representing each of the republics of the Americas at that time.

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— Paul Losch



President John Tigert and Cuban Ambassador Orestes Ferrera at UF's 1930 Commencement.

But in 1931, Latin American studies seemed an unlikely niche for a relatively young Southern university known primarily for teaching students to become better farmers.

“Some naysayers thought it novel that UF, a small land-grant institution in the deep South, would seek to become a leader in foreign relations,” says Paul Losch, assistant librarian for UF’s Latin American Collection. “President Tigert wanted to show that UF’s location and its curriculum of applied arts and sciences made it especially suited to such work.”

The institute became the School of Inter-American Studies in 1951 and then the Center for Latin American Studies in 1963, shortly after being designated one of the first National Resource Centers by the U.S. Department of Education. The center has been funded by the education department continuously since 1961, and current center Director Philip Williams says the recently renewed four-year, \$1.8 million grant is recognition that the center continues to serve as a national resource for the study of Latin America and the Caribbean.

“The new Title VI grant will allow the center to have a major impact at UF and beyond by expanding our area studies and language courses, increasing our collaboration with institutions in Latin America, and improving the scope and access of our innovative outreach programs,” Williams says.

One of the first and most comprehensive interdisciplinary programs at the university, the Center for Latin American



Studies currently focuses its research in four areas: Tropical Conservation and Development (TCD), Latin American Business Environment, Law and Policy in the Americas, and Immigration and Latinos.

In March, hundreds of faculty, students and alumni participated in the center’s 60th annual conference, “Looking Forward, Looking Back: Celebrating 80 years of Latin American Studies at the University of Florida.” Among the topics addressed were the Mexican “Narcocultura” and Latin American economic challenges.

The center is also closely integrated with the Latin American Collection at the Smathers Libraries. With more than 500,000 books, 1,100 periodicals and 55,000 maps and atlases, the collection ranks among the finest in the world. Scholars flock to its stacks to study unique resources, like more than 2.5 million pages of Spanish Florida archival materials gathered from years of microfilming in Spain’s Archivo General de Indias; and more than 1.2 million documents from the late 19th and 20th century about the development of the Cuban sugar industry.

The library also has arguably the best Caribbean collection anywhere, including the largest compilation of papers about colonial Haiti. Although the January 2010 earthquake may have destroyed archival documents in Haitian institutions, much of the country’s historical records are kept in libraries in France and in the UF collection. The university is participating in the Protecting Haitian Patrimony Initiative, a consortium of U.S. libraries supporting archival recovery and preservation projects in Haitian libraries after the earthquake.

From ecology and business to sociology and the arts, UF’s 170 Latin Americanist faculty members are pursuing research and scholarship that is as relevant to Florida and the United States as it is to Brazil and Chile.



Laurie Hice Michelson



“We had to think of a very different strategy about conservation. And gender came in a very big way.”

— Marianne Schmink



Emilio Bruna

TCD students, faculty and partners in Porto Dias, Acre, Brazil.

Empowering People

Fifty years ago, when the federal government first funded the center, scholarship about Latin America was just beginning to move beyond history and politics into emerging fields like ecology, anthropology and the role of women in shaping the region.

Marianne Schmink, Professor of Latin American Studies and Anthropology, knows firsthand about working with women’s groups. In 1994, she established MERGE (Managing Ecosystems and Resources with Gender Emphasis), a five-year program funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development. MERGE brought women from Peru, Ecuador and Brazil together to discuss environmental problems in their regions. The program sought to empower these women to attain leadership positions in their communities so they could facilitate rainforest protection programs.

“We had to think of a very different strategy about conservation,” Schmink says, “and gender came in a very big way.”

But MERGE, says Schmink, would not have happened without the benefit of previous agricultural initiatives developed by UF faculty in agronomy and anthropology who had fostered grassroots relationships with farmers in Acre, Brazil.

They created an agroforestry development program for small producers and helped facilitate the creation of PESACRE, a non-governmental group of farmers who created new agricultural systems relevant to the small-scale agriculture in which they engaged. The UF academics who worked with PESACRE farmers began to reexamine their own agricultural framework — where previous emphasis had been on large-scale agriculture — to see how they could best help these small-scale producers improve their agricultural yields and enter new markets.

“The development solutions that would work for big farming would not necessarily apply to low-income farmers,” Schmink says.

UF faculty collaborated with PESACRE for 13 years and the farmers continue to promote change in regional policy making in Brazil. The experience with that group prompted Schmink and her colleagues to create the Tropical Conservation and Development program to train graduate students for



careers in resource management, environmental protection and sustainable economic development.

The program, the first of its kind in the United States, has provided fellowships to 145 UF graduate students from 27 countries. The program works to train leaders who can proactively advance the science, culture and practice of conservation in the Latin American region.

Center faculty members encourage students to carry out problem-based applied research in collaboration with local institutions and researchers, and the program is credited with having fostered one of the largest concentrations of research on the Amazon region of any academic institution in the world.

“Almost all of our students have done some work in the field, and we try to consciously build on that,” says Schmink. “We put students in charge of their own learning.”

One of those students, AVECITA Chicchon, played a key role in alerting Schmink to a MacArthur Foundation grant that would further expand the mission of TCD.

In 2009, UF was among just 10 universities worldwide chosen by the foundation to develop a new master’s in development practice. The nearly \$1 million grant funds a UF program that trains students to assist impoverished populations in both Latin America and Africa through sustainable development.

“When I started out, people were talking about cattle being the future of the Amazon. Indigenous people were thought of as ignorant and unproductive,” says Schmink. “While the big development projects are going forward, there is a lot of attention given to alternatives. Attention is focused on sustainability and trying to reconcile how people can develop without deforesting.”

The Amazon rainforest holds a decade’s worth of global carbon emissions in its leaves and branches and generations of history in its people, but deforestation is releasing about 200 million tons of carbon back into the atmosphere annually and destroying the region’s cultures. Researchers with the Center for Latin American Studies are looking at the many ways this deforestation impacts the region and beyond.



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— Richard Stepp



Eric Zamora

“Over 90 percent of Atlantic tropical forests in Brazil are gone. We have to understand fragmented ecosystems because that’s all we’re going to have left.”

— Emilio Bruna



Ecologist Emilio Bruna, for example, has worked for 12 years in Brazil to understand how ecosystems change when deforestation creates rainforest “islands.”

“Over 90 percent of Atlantic tropical forests in Brazil are gone,” says Bruna. “We have to understand fragmented ecosystems because that’s all we’re going to have left.”

Bruna’s research has found that plants struggle to take hold in fragmented areas.

“For tropical plants, how big you are determines how well you reproduce,” he says. “It turns out that the plants are growing smaller, like someone who is malnourished or emaciated.”

Bruna and his colleagues in Brazil and at Columbia University are attempting to identify what particular environmental stressors are causing these plant species to be malnourished.

UF ethnobotanist Richard Stepp focuses on how environmental destruction impacts indigenous people.

“If you look at cultures worldwide, the primary way they survive is through plants,” says Stepp. “Ethnobotany is the science of survival for many cultures.”

Three years ago, the American Museum of Natural History in New York commissioned Stepp to create a series of maps showing how the same environmental pressures that threatened plant species contributed to language loss among indigenous people worldwide. Stepp’s laboratory is an ethnobotanical herbarium, a repository of native plants from Central America and the Caribbean.

“We can look at the distribution of plant species, or lack thereof, and make a strong connection to how many languages are left,” he says. “Right now we have 7,000 languages worldwide and we’ll probably see half those languages disappear. And tied to those languages are the environmental knowledge that’s lost.”

Stepp and his students have established partnerships with indigenous and rural communities such as the Mopan, Q’Eqchi’, and Tzeltal Maya of Mexico and the Garifuna of Southern Belize (UF has even offered courses on the Garifuna language). In Chiapas, Mexico, his team facilitated community

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— Efraín Barradas

meetings among different indigenous groups so they could discuss the various ways they use native plants for medicinal or spiritual reasons.

Efraín Barradas, a professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies whose research focuses on popular culture in Latin American literature and art, says an interdisciplinary center is the perfect place to study the cross-cultural exchanges that are common in the history of people in the Americas.

“The center looks at Latin America inside the United States ... it’s not a distant place you study, it’s right here in front of us,” says Barradas.

Williams and UF religion Professor Manuel Vasquez have observed these same cross-cultural exchanges in their research into how religious networks among Latin American immigrants in the U.S. South have provided social and political resources for their Brazilian, Mexican and Central American parishioners.

“It’s not just an expression of religious devotion,” Williams says. “Religion is, in a sense, a way for them to reaffirm their national identity.”

But the researchers have found that Latin Americans’ experiences in the United States also impact the religion they bring home.

Gateway To The Americas

In 2009 Florida exported \$10.6 billion in goods to Brazil, \$4.4 billion to Venezuela, \$3.8 billion to Colombia and \$2.7 billion to Chile. But when Terry McCoy came to UF in 1975, Latin America was mostly controlled by military dictators who had nationalized their industries — with one exception.

“Chile is the most interesting,” says McCoy, an emeritus professor of political science who has written extensively about Chile. “There was a military government that insisted on a free-market economy — but through violating human rights.”

After General Augusto Pinochet was forced from power in 1988, Chileans continued to embrace free-market principles and honor trade agreements with the United States first established during the dictatorship. The country has funneled

private investment into non-traditional commodities such as wine, salmon and winter fruits and vegetables, helping Chileans achieve the highest standard of living in Latin America.

McCoy, who directs the center’s Latin American Business Environment Program, says the courses he teaches reflect a far different Latin America now. Chile and other nations promote international trade policies through their freely elected governments.

The most dramatic of these changes has occurred in Brazil, says McCoy, who started a summer study-abroad program for UF students in Rio de Janeiro 12 years ago. His students study class purchasing power in the country by visiting factories and small businesses, and by examining entrenched drug interests and economic inequalities in the city’s favelas, or slums.

Another country of intense interest to Florida is Cuba. President Tigert made multiple visits to Cuba during his tenure to forge academic links between UF and the University of Havana, even inviting the Cuban ambassador to the United States to speak at the 1930 UF commencement. But the Great Depression tightened spending on these kinds of collaborations; then, the Cuban revolution effectively ended diplomatic ties with the country — a policy that trickled down to universities, forcing academics to sever their connections.



Church in Mexico.



Anthropology doctoral student Allison Hopkins conducted her fieldwork in Yucatan, Mexico.



Assistant Professor Welson Tremura leads the renowned UF music ensemble Jacaré Brazil.



UF business students visiting the Brazilian Development Bank in Rio de Janeiro.



Laurie Hite Mitchelson

Philip Williams (right) and Stephen Walroth-Sadurni, president of the Center for Latin American Studies alumni board, unveil a historic marker on the Plaza of the Americas.

But not all knowledge was cut off. Deere, a professor of food and resources economics, travelled to Cuba in the late 1980s, prior to joining the university, and was the first U.S. citizen to receive permission to study agricultural programs on the island. From 1991 to 1995 she surveyed farmers who worked on either private farms, state farms or production cooperatives about their income.

“I felt honored that Cubans considered this to be an important part of their society,” says Deere about winning a Cuban award for the two books that resulted from that research.

Deere says UF’s hiring last year of Lillian Guerra, a renowned scholar of Cuban history, was a significant step in the university’s efforts to create stronger academic ties between UF and the island. A new federal program has allowed UF faculty to form a working group about issues of concern between Florida and Cuba, covering topics such as climate change and invasive species loss.

“Sooner or later change is coming to Cuba,” says Williams. “UF has to be prepared so that when changes do happen in Cuba, we are in a position to be that number one resource for academics, business, the media and the public.”

Since its creation, the Center for Latin American Studies has been uniquely positioned to anticipate and respond to change throughout the hemisphere.

As Williams said in March at the dedication of a historic marker on the Plaza of the Americas: “80 years ago, who would have thought that President Tigert’s unlikely vision would put UF on the map as a pioneer in Latin American Studies and that the center would go on to become a leader in interdisciplinary research and training. May the next 80 years be as fruitful as the last 80 years.”

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