The origins of area, foreign language, and international studies centers on campuses in the United States stem from an “elite consensus” in the late 1950s that international expertise was an important condition for successful foreign policy, including diplomacy, military engagements, and espionage. This consensus has since been shattered, with the result that this unique system of federal funding for the projects to which most of us have dedicated our professional lives is imperiled. The alternative to a policy establishment that is informed about the world might be a policy establishment that is dangerously ignorant.

Latin American Studies and United States Foreign Policy
by Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof

So it is hard to argue that the collapse of federally funded area studies, as we know it, would be a good thing. Yet I think it is worthwhile to subject the model to scrutiny. I will begin by relating the history of my field, Latin American Studies, as it emerged nationally and at the University of Michigan, to the history of United States foreign policy directed to that region. Then I will reflect very briefly on some of the challenges that the area studies funding model creates for scholars working in Latin American Studies at Michigan in the present, and on how these challenges may shift in the near future.

The University of Michigan began offering Spanish language instruction in 1868. This was part of a general boom in the teaching of Spanish in the wake of the Mexican American war, beginning with the U.S. Naval Academy in 1846 (the year the war began) and the U.S. Military Academy in 1853. In subsequent decades, private and public institutions in the Midwest, California, and Texas, also began teaching Spanish. In part this was a response to a perceived need for translators and administrators in newly acquired territories and in subsequent commercial and diplomatic adventures in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. The topics of Latin American history, culture, and politics remained outside the university during these years. Yet these topics were very much part of the popular culture and political discourse in the United States. The penny press, beginning in the 1830s, widely diffused stories about Latin America’s history as well as descriptions of Latin America.

A screen print poster created between 1935-1943 by the United States Works Progress Administration.
The Origins of Latin American Studies

Latin American history made inroads into universities in the U.S. in the years immediately after the occupation of Cuba and the Philippines (1898) and the establishment of Puerto Rico as an unincorporated territory (1901). These were also years of rapid transformation of the Southwest, as irrigation and agribusiness began to reshape the landscape and labor regimes of territories that had once been Mexico. In this context, Herbert Bolton, hired to teach history at the newly created University of Texas, began work (sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation and Secretary of State Elihu Root) collecting documents about formerly Mexican areas of the United States in Mexican archives. Bolton later moved to Berkeley, where he shaped the emerging field of Latin American history in 1915, Bolton and his colleagues hosted a major Panama-Pacific Historical Conference at Berkeley. Conversations begun at the conference led directly to the founding of the Hispanic American Historical Review (HAHR), in 1918. By then, the United States had intervened militarily in the Mexican Revolution and in Honduras, and was occupying and governing the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti (as well as the Philippines and the Canal Zone). The scholars who founded the HAHR sought out and received the support of railroad companies, private businessmen, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Departments of State and Treasury. The Postal Censorship Office of the United States Government recruited fluent Spanish speakers to help read the mails. Irving Leonard, the future chair of the Department of Romance Languages at U-M, worked in the Censorship Office before going to Berkeley to study with Bolton.

Michigan hired Arthur Aiton, another student of Herbert Bolton, as its first full-time Professor of Latin American History in 1921. Geographer, Preston James, arrived two years later. James had travelled to do his first graduate fieldwork in Panama aboard a steamship owned by the United Fruit Company. He wrote that the United States had created a “beautiful paradise” in Central America, though he worried about the mixture of “black, yellow, and white men and women such as can only be found in the enervating, moral destroying tropics.” Despite their ties to the diplomatic and commercial establishment, however, early Latin Americanist scholars were not universally jingoistic and ethnocentric. Carnegie Foundation employees, for instance, argued for the consolidation of a professional field of Latin American research precisely to overturn the tradition of ill informed, and flatly insulting, publications about Latin America, arguing for “reciprocal knowledge” and engagement with scholars from the region as a basis for international cooperation.

Pan-Americanism and WWII

This idea of Latin Americanist scholarship and scholarly exchange as central to the project of pan-Americanism became more prominent in the 1930s, with the establishment of the Good Neighbor Policy, under Roosevelt. In principle, Roosevelt’s pan-Americanism sought to replace the longstanding practices of intervention and occupation with friendly bilateral and multilateral relations among neighbors. In practice, this often meant allying with Latin American dictatorships to secure access to raw materials and secure the hemisphere as part of the war effort. In 1939, with the war looming in Europe, Michigan hosted a
Summer Institute on Latin American Studies in Ann Arbor. Funded by the ACLS and the Rockefeller Foundation, the program was projected to be the first in a series of similar events establishing a new, multidisciplinary, national field of Latin American Studies. A report of the Institute, published by Aiton in the HAH, reveals a strong pan-American perspective. The program included U-M professors of History, Spanish, Anthropology, Music, Art History, and Political Science, more than 30 colleagues from other universities, representatives of various Latin American governments (including Gilberto Freyre from Brazil), and the Pan-American union, as well as “government, banking, and business” circles.

When the war broke out, ACLS and the State Department enlisted Irving Leonard, then the Latin American specialist in the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, to survey U.S. campuses to identify “specialists to perform missions to Latin America,” and programs that were training experts who might be useful to the war effort. When the survey was complete, he joined the Michigan faculty in Romance Languages. Meanwhile, perhaps recruited by Leonard, Arthur Aiton directed the U.S. Army Latin-American Area Training Program at the University of Michigan and taught summer courses in Latin America, sponsored by the State Department.

The Cold War
Then came the Sputnik moment in 1957, and a new federal initiative to fund Latin American Studies in interdisciplinary centers. This was three years after the CIA orchestrated a coup against the democratic government of Guatemala, the beginning of a long and bloody period of military rule. The United States government was funneling support to the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, to little avail. Scholars founded a national Latin American Studies Association in 1965, the year that U.S. marines invaded Santo Domingo to put down a revolt against the military dictatorship there. Interestingly, Michigan did not become a NRC in these years, although it had many luminaries studying the region in various disciplines. This has led to speculation that at least one prominent faculty member opposed the establishment of a Title VI center on the principle that scholars should not collaborate too closely with the emerging national security apparatus. I have not been able to confirm this rumor. Of course, scholars of Latin America at U-M relied on a range of other government and private sources to fund their research, and thus benefited in other ways from the boom in area studies during the Cold War. They also travelled freely to and from the region, with the benefit of U.S. passports and consular services.

I do not want to suggest that there has always been a simple, instrumental relationship between academic work in Latin American studies in the U.S. and the worst elements of United States policy towards Latin America. But going back through this timeline makes the important point that the areas studies model we inherit—the marriage of scholarship and higher education to nationalist foreign policy concerns—has serious potential drawbacks. In particular it risks implicating scholars and teachers in the profound inequalities of power and resources, and the many episodes of violence that continue to mark the involvement of the United States with the world. At the same time it risks creating a closed loop in which research and policy agendas circulate, potentially leading to findings that simply justify nationalist or imperial policy choices. Finally, the emergence of Latin American studies in the context of asymmetrical power relations in the hemisphere creates a problem of epistemological categories. Former LACS director Fernando Coronil, riffing on Edward Said, has called this “Occidentalism.” He defines Occidentalism as the construction of an imagined “Western” self in hierarchal relationships with an imagined other (or others): dividing the world into center and periphery, and the hemisphere into U.S. and Latin America. The problem with these geographical categories, Coronil argues, is that the power relations that create them include “the power to obscure their genesis in inequality, to sever their historical connections, and thus to present as the internal and separate attributes of bounded

This cartoon, “His neighborly suggestion,” drawn by J.S. Pughe, appeared on the cover of Puck magazine March 25, 1903. It was one of many such depictions of U.S.-Latin American relations in the period, which tended to present growing U.S. power in the region in a positive light, while relying on and helping to disseminate demeaning stereotypes about Latin America. The caption reads “Now, young man, while I’m digging here [in Panama], I’d like a long period of depression in the Revolution Business.”
entities what are in fact historical outcomes of connected peoples." The structuring of academic work around the geographic areas defined by the Title VI program may be a perfect example.

Such effects are neither simple nor purely instrumental, nor are they uncontested. Faculty at the University of Michigan did finally create a Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program in 1984. This program later evolved into the present, Title VI funded, Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (LACS). In 1984 the Reagan administration funneled growing resources to Contra insurgents in Nicaragua and to military regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala. These governments, with U.S. complicity, murdered more than 120,000 of their citizens. The creation of LACS at Michigan certainly did not stem from enthusiasm among area experts. To the contrary, at least some of the founders of our program, and many who have participated in it since, approached their scholarship and teaching from an explicitly dissident position with respect to the wars in Central America (and other policies). In fact, nationally, Latin American Studies, despite its frequent dependence on government funding, has become a key site for criticizing and exposing the exercise of U.S. power in the region, for challenging established foreign policy expertise, and for working to unravel the knot of our relative privilege with respect to colleagues in Latin America. Criticism of United States foreign policy does not, in and of itself, guarantee careful or considered scholarship. Nor do dissenting policy views necessarily escape the epistemological traps set by power relations in the hemisphere. But the emergence of informed dissent within the structure of federally funded area studies is a mark of just how potentially transformative serious scholarly engagement with foreign languages, literature, culture, and politics can be. Criticism of U.S. foreign policy and its intellectual apparatus, and criticism of the neat division of the hemisphere into United States and Latin America (which can be traced back to Bolton himself) are, to my mind, two of the most valuable, if unintended, consequences of the area studies model. Members of the political establishment will not necessarily agree, which may be part of the reason for our present funding predicaments.

Current Challenges
It is worth noting, though, that because we depend on funding controlled by the federal government, scholars continue to operate within institutional and conceptual boundaries that work against some of the most productive lines of inquiry. At LACS we are prohibited from using Title VI funding for activities on Puerto Rico. The federal government argues that Puerto Rico is a United States territory and therefore cannot be part of Latin America. A similar proscription blocks us from using Title VI funds for work on the massive, contemporary displacement of Latin Americans to the United States. A similar proscription blocks us from using Title VI funds for work on the massive, contemporary displacement of Latin Americans to the United States. Again, this is not seen as area studies, but rather “ethnic studies.” These rules ignore and erase the ways that imperialism and other social phenomena have both erected and blurred the boundaries between the United States and Latin America. The rules hold on to fixed boundaries on political grounds rather than intellectual grounds. My colleagues at LACS have been active in seeking alternatives to strict nationalist, and Occidentalist, framings of hemispheric exchanges. They have turned instead to Atlantic, global, and transnational models and have engaged critically with interdisciplinary work in American Studies, African American Studies, and Latino Studies (as well as the easier to fund collaborations with African and European Studies). Such relationships are often fraught, but are extremely fertile. Yet our dependence on Title VI funding is a constant impediment to this kind of work.

Future Prospects
All this may be on the verge of shifting dramatically. Whether or not NRCs survive the current Title VI budget crisis, they will benefit from increased attention to global or international education. This kind of shift seems already to be
underway at Michigan. State social studies standards, a presidential initiative on international education, and the rush to enter the competition for global higher education market share, are providing new

opportunities and new constraints for area specialists. In some regards this is hopeful. Global and international frameworks may end up supporting lines of inquiry, such as work connecting migration to the United States to social transformations in sending societies, that area studies excludes. The challenge will be, as it has been in Atlantic and transnational models, to take advantage of the new opportunities to cut across regional boundaries, while preserving the strengths of traditional area studies.

What are those strengths? Despite its pitfalls, the area studies model has built an expectation that scholarship will be founded on serious language training; specific, local cultural and historical knowledge; meaningful, longstanding collaborations with colleagues in the region; and a certain skepticism about the very institutional frameworks in which we work. It is not clear to me that the institutional forces putting money into new global initiatives are as committed to the kind of deep, rigorous, engagement with the local, or critique of the imperial, that is our stock and trade. Some visions of the global have a sweeping scale that may render such engagement simply unmanageable. And some models of the global ignore or hide the violence and inequality that mark past and present-day experiences of globalization. Which is to say, I think we should be ready to make the leap from traditional area studies to global studies, if need be. But we should champion a vision of the global that does not throw the baby out with the bath water. And, even as we make use of the resources the new regime offers, we should expect, as generations of scholars have done in Title VI centers, to adopt roles as dissidents and as critics of the regime itself.

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Professor Hoffnung-Garskof teaches classes about Latin American history, Latin American migration to the United States, and Latin American music (including samba, bossa nova, and MPB). He has been the recipient of fellowships from the Social Science Research Council and the Spencer Foundation/National Academy of Education.

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