

THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN COUNCIL
FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES:
A Silver Anniversary Assessment

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The silver anniversary of the Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies (RMCLAS) provides a good opportunity for an assessment of that organization. Much of the following analysis focuses upon annual meetings since they are the major activity of the organizational membership. Programs and minutes of past meetings as well as organizational newsletters and correspondence were examined for patterns in the areas of program participation (numbers, institutional affiliation, academic discipline, and sex of participants), topics favored (as concerns discipline and theme), the general political orientation of the organization, openness to participation from the outside, and organizational publications; an attempt is also made to provide some appreciation for the subjective side of the organization's life.

RMCLAS ranks as the oldest of the North American regional associations specializing in the Hispanic area of the world. It was established as a direct result of the 1954 regional "round table" held at the University of New Mexico, one of a series sponsored by the Pan American Union of the Organization of American States as part of an effort to stimulate Latin American studies in the United States and to encourage cultural exchange between "both continents."¹ During that 1954 meeting, representatives from various institutions of higher learning in the Rocky Mountain area determined to maintain the momentum created by the efforts of the Pan American Union by establishing a regionally based organization dedicated to fostering Latin American studies. A committee was formed and undertook the task of preparing a constitution; delegates were invited to return to New Mexico in 1955 for the election of officers, approval of the constitution, and general sessions on Latin American affairs.

The original constitution of RMCLAS, as adopted at the 1955 meeting, set forth high ideals under article 2 (Aims and Purposes) such as working for "unity among peoples of the Americas" and "the formation of an international association of specialists on Latin America" that "would serve the functions of orientating, implementing and coordinating research and teaching in Latin American studies and inter-American relations." Seminars held by RMCLAS "would be interdisciplinary in character with membership open not only to teachers and students but also to business, labor, press, cultural organizations, and museums." Certain practical matters such as membership qualifications, officer posi-

tions, frequency and location of meetings, and delineation of the area to be included were also resolved.

The gap between the formal act of establishing RMCLAS on paper and the reality of giving birth to a viable instrument with the potential to achieve the goals set forth in its charter was very much apparent during the first two meetings, which were quite modest in program and participation. The next year, however, the organizational leadership asserted itself to the degree required to provide the necessary combination of inspiration and guidance. By the 1957 meeting, a pattern or formula for success had developed; it consisted essentially of providing a leisurely program of sessions on topics of general interest plus one or two glitter personages from the area of Latin American studies or politics to serve as heads of panels or banquet speakers. Also, for the next eight years, sponsorship of RMCLAS meetings by the Pan American Union would be maintained symbolically (although the Union contributed little in the way of actual program planning or economic support) by a delegate from that branch of the OAS.²

The evolution of RMCLAS follows a fairly clear pattern. Throughout the remainder of the fifties and on through the sixties, the number of participants taking an active part on programs remained at the same level with a slight tendency to increase. The general range was in the twenties with few occasions where the figure dropped or rose. However, the dues-paying membership during those years showed a continual increase on the average of seven members per meeting, indicating somewhat of a lag in the area of program expansion. Beginning in the 1970s, a dramatic increase in program participation became apparent. The 1973 meeting marked the real beginning of the trend when the number of program participants reached 45. The next year, the number increased to 65, and 1975 saw an all-time high of 102. The 1975 meeting also demonstrated what are probably the practical limits for program expansion; that is, because of the large number of sessions offered, attendance at some of them scarcely exceeded the number of participants on the program. Thereafter, the number of sessions and program participants dropped with the latter being 67 in 1976 and leveling off (possibly) at 84 in 1977. Standing membership lists, which consist normally of those who have paid their dues at least once during the tenure of a Secretary-Treasurer (i.e., three years), increased the most dramatically of all. The 1959 list contained 49 such members, 1965 had 86, in 1970 377 were registered, and the figure reached 503 in 1974. The 1974 figure might be somewhat inflated since the totals of dues-paying members for the three previous meetings did not reach that level. Probably it is a question of loose record keeping occasioned by a reluctance to remove nonpayers of dues from the rolls.

The dramatic increase in membership and in program participation in recent years can be attributed to several factors. For one, the pattern coincides with a change in leadership of the organization with a new generation of Latin Americanists (usually those trained in the "golden years" of the late fifties and early sixties) assuming control from the "founding fathers" who were prepared during the forties and early fifties. Also pertinent in this regard was the expanding involvement of female Latin Americanists. From 1955 to 1973, a total of ten

women read papers or chaired sessions at RMCLAS meetings (i.e., less than one per annual meeting). The 1974 program registered four female participants and an entire session was devoted to the role of women in Latin America. The number of women on the 1975 program was thirteen, with eleven each for the years 1976 and 1977. However, no woman as yet has served as president of the organization although several have been active on the Executive Council. The growth in the number of Latin Americanists trained in the field is probably the major factor in explaining the recent increased participation and membership as well as the earlier limited involvement of women. That is, the relatively low number of women involved in RMCLAS during 1955–73 was probably more a reflection of the scant numbers of trained female Latin Americanists active in the field than a manifestation of the “machismo” phenomenon somehow emanating from the Latin American culture in which the membership specializes.

Another aspect of the life and orientation of RMCLAS that can be measured from available data is the openness to program participation of Latin Americanists from institutions located outside of the Rocky Mountain area. During 1954–72, outside participants on any given annual program fluctuated from 6 percent to 47 percent. However, it should be kept in mind that the total number of participants during the early years was relatively small; thus the percentage of outsiders at times appears proportionately large although the actual numbers involved were not great. Furthermore, these outsiders tended to be “official” types (representatives from the Pan American Union, State Department officials, banquet speakers) who were invited to the meeting. The first year that a volunteer participant appeared on the program in a “normal” session was 1963. Beginning in 1973, and a major factor explaining the dramatic increase in overall participation and membership since that date, the number of participants from outside the area reached nineteen while the number of participants from within was twenty-six. The number of outsiders continued to grow and actually reached the point, in the 1975 meeting, where more of them participated on the program than did those of “native extraction.” Over the life of the organization, the percentage of outside program participants has been about forty-one.³

The relatively high degree of outside involvement in RMCLAS might seem to indicate an openness excessive almost to the point of raising the question of whether the organization could be taken over or dominated from the outside. That such is not the case can be demonstrated by an examination of the attitude of the RMCLAS leadership toward Latin Americanist organizations of national scope. In a *Newsletter* of 1960, Raymond Mack (president of RMCLAS at that time) recommended caution in dealing with the Association for Latin American Studies (the precursor of the Latin American Studies Association). He advised the membership to “withstand pressures toward ‘personalismo,’ ‘pandillismo,’ or ‘centralismo,’” and to resist any “tendency toward academic colonialism.”⁴ This somewhat paranoid fear of domination from the outside is not limited to RMCLAS, however, as meetings of the Regional Liaison Committee of LASA clearly reveal.

Although the original constitution called for RMCLAS sessions to be

“interdisciplinary in character,” only about 30 percent of the sessions could be so labeled based upon the academic background of those participating (i.e., reading/discussing a paper or as a panel member). Political scientists and sociologists have proven to be the most inclined toward interdisciplinary sessions (about 66 percent of their participation had been in such sessions); representatives of the fine arts have been the least inclined toward this involvement. Historians by far have been the most active in session programs; archeologists the least active. Historians also have supplied the greatest number of presidents for the organization.

As concerns program content, attempts at organizing meetings around a single theme (of which there have been three)⁵ have not been very successful. The demand for sessions in which participants could “do their own thing” has always been stronger than any collective commitment to a single-theme approach. However, viewed from what could be called a natural tendency to select timely topics, RMCLAS has followed national trends. In the early years of the organization, sessions on inter-American cooperation, particularly cultural exchange, predominated. Then, during the 1960–65 interim, the Alliance for Progress, guerrilla warfare, and revolution were recurring subjects for organizational sessions. The late sixties and the seventies have produced what appears to be a split in content emphasis. Those disciplines oriented toward the hard sciences have become more and more involved with questions of development in all of its aspects whereas the others, especially those in literature, have returned to focusing upon culture for its own sake although the use of technical analysis has increased even in this grouping.

Country emphasis is another issue related to program content. As might be expected, Mexico far and away has been singled out the most for analysis. After Mexico, the ranking is Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Chile, and Colombia with the remainder of the countries on a roughly equal footing. The number of papers and panels devoted to Mexico, however, surpasses the total number of papers concerned with all the remaining countries combined. The proximity of Mexico to the Rocky Mountain region, especially to those states most active in the organization, could be a conditioning factor here.

RMCLAS has also experienced a certain evolution in the services that it provides its membership. The development of the *Newsletter* is one example. In the fifties, the *Newsletter* as such consisted mainly of an open letter from the president to the membership, advising them of pertinent matters, setting the dates for the next meeting, etc. During the 1965–66 term, there was an attempt to change the format to coincide more with those being developed by other regional associations. That effort foundered, however, and it was not until 1974 that the *Newsletter* acquired its present format due in large part to financial support provided by Robert Peterson of the Center for Inter-American Studies of the University of Texas at El Paso. The idea adopted in 1974 was that the *Newsletter* should gradually evolve into a journal. Thus, in addition to information on RMCLAS meetings, etc., book reviews and an occasional scholarly article were included. By 1977, it was apparent that this idea was impractical. As a result, and with financial support acquired by John Brasch of the University of

Nebraska, a RMCLAS *Proceedings* was launched. At the same time, responsibility for the *Newsletter* was transferred to Montana State University under the editorship of Edward Barry.⁶

An examination of the involvement of member institutions in RMCLAS activities reveals that the area commonly referred to as the "southwest" is the real heartland of the organization. This is comprised mainly of New Mexico, Arizona, and West Texas. The number of annual meetings held in this heartland is double the number of meetings held in the remaining five states included in the organization. State population has some influence in this regard but it does not serve as a satisfactory explanation in itself. The population of Arizona is not half again as large as that of Colorado although that ratio reflects the relationship of the figures on RMCLAS involvement by those two states. Again, proximity of the Mexican border and culture could be an influential factor in this situation.

The general political orientation of the RMCLAS membership and hence the organization is moderate. This is revealed by the papers read at RMCLAS sessions as well as during business meetings. In the 1970 business meeting, for example, a lively debate developed over whether to change RMCLAS bylaws to impose strict requirements for membership; this was in response to an occurrence at the previous LASA meeting where a determined minority temporarily gained control of a meeting and pushed through some relatively radical resolutions.

A perusal of RMCLAS membership lists over the years reveals an overwhelming preponderance of those who are associated with institutions of higher learning, with only spotty representation from "business, labor, press, cultural organizations, and museums." Public school teachers involved in teaching Latin American content courses also have not been well represented. The latter group seems to be the one with the most potential for organizational expansion if RMCLAS desires such for the immediate future.

Finally, to the average member, the evolution of RMCLAS over the years probably has been most evident in the changes that have affected the size and spirit of the annual meetings. During the early years, meetings were small, intimate, rather informal affairs where a delegate could reasonably aspire to meet every other delegate present. Papers and banquet speeches frequently had a chatty, off-the-cuff tenor. In contrast, contemporary meetings are vast undertakings requiring complex planning and financial backing from the host institution, while papers and banquet speeches are likely to be specialized and technical, reflecting the current status of the disciplines involved.

Even so, annual meetings still develop special facets of their own due to circumstances either fortuitous or endemic. The 1957 meeting, for example, is remembered as the one where the banquet speaker delivered a two and one-half hour address. Meetings held at Brigham Young University are unique because of the absence of supplies of coffee, tobacco, etc. During breaks in sessions held at BYU the rest rooms have the appearance of detonation sites for miniature atomic weapons because of the smoke clouds. At the 1976 meeting, several delegates were rousted by the police in connection with the robbery of a local service

station by an assailant "with Latin features." An article in a local newspaper in 1976 described RMCLAS as an organization of "scholars and historians," acknowledging a distinction deemed always to have existed in the minds of certain detractors of that worthy discipline. Knowledge of incidents such as these distinguishes the "old hands" from the newcomers.

As RMCLAS enters its twenty-fifth year, it stands as a viable organization whose evolution evinces the influence of regional factors as well as national trends. As such, it serves the function of what might be called "professional reduction" for its membership while providing opportunities for cross-fertilization, heuristic influences, and old-fashioned camaraderie.

YEAR, PRESIDENT, AND LOCATION OF PAST RMCLAS MEETINGS

1954 - None,* University of New Mexico
1955 - Russell Ewing, University of New Mexico
1956 - Russell Ewing, University of Arizona
1957 - Raymond Mack, Texas Technological College
1958 - Raymond Mack, Brigham Young University
1959 - Raymond Mack, University of New Mexico
1960 - Raymond Mack, University of Colorado
1961 - Ernest Wilkins, Brigham Young University
1962 - Carl Sauer, The American Institute for Foreign Trade
1963 - Miguel Jorri n, University of New Mexico
1964 - Arthur Campa, University of Denver
1965 - John Martinez, Arizona State University
1966 - John Haddox, Texas Western College
1967 - Raymond Mack, Texas Technological College
1968 - Donald Cutter, University of New Mexico
1969 - Arthur Campa, University of Denver
1970 - Lyman Shreeve, Brigham Young University
1971 - Jay Hunt, Arizona State University
1972 - William Grupp, University of Colorado
1973 - Manuel Machado, University of Montana
1974 - Robert Hayes, Texas Tech University
1975 - Joaquin Duarte, American Graduate School of International Management
1976 - Charles Harris, New Mexico State University
1977 - Michael Meyer, University of Arizona
1978 - Stanley Rose, University of Montana

*There was no officially elected president during this first gathering, although Miguel Jorri n served as presiding officer.

NOTES

1. Ernest K. Chamberlin, "The Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies: The First Twenty Years" *LARR* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1975):168.
2. For the years 1957-59, Theo Crevenna of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the

Pan American Union served as official representative at RMCLAS meetings. In 1960, David Heft served in that capacity. Francisco Cespedes was the delegate for the years 1963–65. Since 1965 there has been no official sponsorship or representative from the Pan American Union.

3. The figures on program participants since 1973 are as follows:

<i>Year</i>	<i>From Within</i>	<i>From Without</i>
1973	26	19
1974	42	23
1975	47	55
1976	41	26
1977	43	41

4. *RMCLAS Newsletter*, 20 February 1960, p. 1.
5. The three meetings where a thematic approach was attempted and the themes adopted were as follows: 1960—Unity and Diversity in the Americas; 1962—The Alliance for Progress; 1970—Problems of Modernization in Latin America.
6. Previous *Newsletter* editors were Michael Jost, University of Texas at San Antonio, and Richard Bath, University of Texas at El Paso.