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Archival Research and the Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives

Dan Hazen

The Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives, based at Harvard University, has, since 1996, awarded more than one hundred small grants to preserve or enhance access to scarce research materials held within Latin America. This essay outlines the background to the program, explains its history and operations, describes some of the grants, and discusses both continuing issues and emerging possibilities.

The Context

The sources that support Latin Americanist scholarship cluster unevenly around the world. The imperial archives in Spain and Portugal are, of course, unique. The strongest library collections, too, are to be found in Europe and North America: local holdings in Latin America are in some cases more complete, but even the region's best libraries lack the mass of complementary books and journals, from adjacent countries as well as more distant locations, that allow comparison and provide context. But Latin Americanists also rely on the newspapers, pamphlets, photographs, film, music, video, and, most importantly, archival holdings, that can be found only within the region itself. Local libraries and archives are called upon to organize these sources, preserve them, and make them available for use.

Many of the region's repositories, however, have trouble fulfilling this charge. Tales of preventable damage and loss are depressingly common. While mismanagement, ignorance, or short-sightedness are sometimes to blame, aggressive climates, inadequate buildings, untrained staffs, and insufficient resources are more frequently the cause. Some collections are trapped in an inertia resulting from budgets too small to support relatively inexpensive, but nonetheless critical, improvements. A personal computer, for example, might allow some repositories to catalog holdings that are now inaccessible. Simple

facility upgrades might enhance user access or storage conditions. Acid-free materials or raw microfilm stock, typically hard-currency imports, could jump-start preservation. Consultancies or training sessions might pave the way for programmatic improvements. Projects to microfilm or digitize specific resources could enhance both preservation and access. In these and many other cases, modest interventions might make a huge difference by both saving endangered or neglected materials and allowing well-intentioned staffs to function more effectively.

Latin Americanist scholars and their home institutions have, over time, taken different approaches in working with the region's documentary record. Scholars, libraries, and (perhaps more problematically) collectors have from the outset sought to acquire documents and manuscripts for themselves. Even the most altruistic justifications—that removal would safeguard materials otherwise doomed to destruction or dispersal—have sat poorly with those sustaining the loss. A second and enduring stream of activity has focused on the removal of copies. Hand-prepared transcripts were (and are) simply carried away. But this model for disposition tended to persist even when more versatile technologies such as photography and microphotography came into vogue. Here again, scholars and libraries focused only on getting materials for themselves.¹

Today's expectations are different. As early as the 1950s and 1960s, UNESCO dispatched a mobile camera to microfilm selected archival holdings, especially in Central America and the Caribbean, so as to preserve them for the community as a whole.² Other broad initiatives have followed. The Latin American Microform Project (LAMP), for instance, was formed in the 1970s as a cooperative program of (by now) 42 North American libraries that together fund and carry out microfilming and digitizing projects.³ LAMP operates in full cooperation with host repositories: negative and positive film are provided as a matter of course, marketing rights as a rule remain with the

1. The impulse to acquire or copy unique materials is shared by Latin American institutions as well: many collections include unique materials from other countries as well as copybooks of archival documents. One recently corrected example of self-centered microfilming occurred in the early 1940s, when the Rockefeller Foundation funded a project to microfilm the José Toribio Medina collection at Chile's National Library. In the original effort, the films were simply made and removed.

2. Distribution of the UNESCO films has recently been privatized through a commercial vendor.

3. See the LAMP Web site: <http://www.crl.edu/info/lamp.htm>. This and all subsequent URLs are valid as of 25 November 2002.

host institution, and local microfilm technicians are sought out whenever possible in order to strengthen each country's preservation capacity. Like any other library-based endeavor, however, LAMP is limited in what it can do. Universities fund their libraries to support local research and teaching, and these local priorities by and large define the limits of possibility. Many kinds of activity are therefore out of scope.

The Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives

Latin Americanist needs were addressed in a new way in 1996, when the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded the Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives (PLALA) within Harvard University's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. Mellon's substantial initial support was followed, a few years later, by an even larger renewal grant. Other foundations have supported the program as well: Fundación Antorchas, an Argentine organization under the auspices of the Lapidia Foundation, has cofunded some local projects; the Fundación Polar has contributed to a Venezuelan initiative. By late 2002, PLALA had authorized more than one million dollars in small grants for more than one hundred archival and library-based projects in 17 different countries.⁴

PLALA is different in ambition, scope, and approach from most previous efforts. The program's initial impulse followed conversations between Norman Fiering, director of the John Carter Brown Library, and Ignacio de Larrañendi, head of Spain's Fundación MAPFRE (which later became MAPFRE-América, and ultimately the Fundación Histórica Tavera). MAPFRE, in part inspired by don Ignacio's pan-Hispanic vision, had already conducted archival surveys throughout much of Latin America. These visits highlighted the recurring need for disinterested, practical measures to improve conditions, collections, and services. In late 1994, a day-long meeting in New York brought together an international group of scholars, librarians, and foundation representatives to consider the problem. While everyone recognized the needs, the group was slower in structuring a response. Continuing discussions eventually led to the Mellon Foundation award that established PLALA as a re-granting program for tightly focused projects within the region itself.

PLALA's structure and procedures reflect the priorities that emerged dur-

4. See the Rockefeller Center Web site for a program description, application forms, and a listing of all the funded projects: <http://drclas.fas.harvard.edu/resources/academics.html>, under "Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives."

ing and after the New York meeting. Any new program needed to favor results over expenses: models requiring elaborate advisory groups or heavy travel schedules were quickly ruled out. Awards would be based on organized competitions in which applicants would define their own priorities and needs. The application process itself ensured that only institutions with some degree of stability and administrative capacity would come under consideration. The competitive process also enabled the program to promote compliance with contemporary technical standards. Modest awards—\$10,000 on average, with a \$20,000 limit—both extended the program's reach and encouraged attainable goals. A six-member Program Committee was recruited to review proposals and clarify policies.⁵ Harvard's Office of Sponsored Research, which manages Mellon's interest-bearing grant, was charged with reconciling the university's need for accountability and control against PLALA mandates for speed and flexibility.

The fledgling program required detailed internal procedures. It also needed some prompt early awards in order to establish its presence. Application guidelines and forms were drafted, approved, and then issued in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Publicity flyers were distributed, and committee members and graduate students were recruited to spread the word. Model "Subgrant Agreements" and expedited procedures within Harvard were blocked out and then repeatedly refined. The first trickle of proposals arrived in the fall of 1996, and the first grant check was dispatched toward the end of that year. Only minor procedural modifications have since been necessary.

A few specific examples suggest the nature and range of PLALA projects:

- The Archivo Departamental de Puno, Peru, was awarded funds to purchase metal shelving so that it could move some holdings off the floor.
- The Casa da Memória in Curitiba, Brazil, received a grant for preventive conservation of its nineteenth-century glass-plate photographic negatives.
- Ecuador's Archivo Nacional de Historia, Sección del Azuay, located in Cuenca, utilized PLALA funds to describe some one hundred thousand hitherto unprocessed documents.

5. The initial Program Committee consisted of Kenneth Andrien (Ohio State), John Coatsworth (Harvard), Norman Fiering (John Carter Brown Library), Dan Hazen (Harvard), Deborah Jakubs (Duke), and Herbert Klein (Columbia). John Coatsworth and Norman Fiering have since rotated off, to be replaced by Erick Langer (Georgetown) and Frank Safford (Northwestern). The committee members are all volunteers, and most committee business is conducted via e-mail.

- In Santiago, Chile, the Fundación de Protección a la Infancia Dañada por los Estados de Emergencia (PIDEE) received a grant allowing it to organize, catalogue, and file in acid-free folders some two thousand Pinochet-era case files.
- The Max von Buch library of Argentina's Universidad de San Andrés has received two grants to provide shelving and ensure appropriate storage conditions for its special collections of archives and rare books.
- Guatemala's Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) received support for a microfilming unit to reformat endangered in-house holdings, as well as resources held at other Guatemalan repositories, including municipal archives.
- The Colegio de México's Biblioteca "Daniel Cosío Villegas" is using PLALA support to conserve and digitize materials from its special collections.
- El Salvador's Biblioteca Manuel Gallardo received emergency aid to salvage its unique collections after the country's devastating earthquake of January 13, 2001.

PLALA's grantees include some major institutions: for instance, Chile's National Library and Peru's National Archive. More typical awards focus on far smaller institutions, such as the parish archive in Campeche, Mexico, or the municipal archive in Olavarría, Argentina. Both colonial manuscripts and contemporary materials have been addressed. Most projects have focused on books, newspapers, and documents, but PLALA has also supported work with photographs, sound recordings, and videos.

Most grants reflect a few priority areas. Preservation is a major concern. Different projects have focused on preservation microfilming, piece-level conservation work, efforts to rehouse fragile materials in acid-free folders and appropriate containers, environmental upgrades for stacks and storage areas, and the provision of photocopy machines or other equipment to reduce wear and tear on original sources. Intellectual access—cataloging and collection description—is another priority. Access projects have supported indexes to archives, rare-book cataloging, collection guides, and arrangements to mount collection descriptions on the Web. A small number of digitizing efforts have combined preservation and access. Only one grant, to the earthquake-damaged Biblioteca Manuel Gallardo in El Salvador, has responded to a collection emergency.

PLALA's main purpose is to improve scholarly access to research sources. Its grants comprise the most straightforward means to this end, but indirect mechanisms are important as well. Increased overall awareness of Latin Amer-

ica's endangered or neglected documentary patrimony, in particular, has encouraged additional activity. The process has played out in several different ways:

- Most grant recipients publicize their awards through newsletters, flyers, newspaper reports, conference presentations, or Web page or listserv announcements. Local users, other repositories, scholars, and the community as a whole have therefore learned more about both the collections and the efforts of their custodians.
- PLALA is funded by and administered through well-known organizations. Senior scholars and librarians determine its awards. And the competition is real: fewer than half of the proposals have been approved. All these features enhance the program's visibility and credibility. Additional attention and support have in some cases followed as well. Argentina's *Fundación Antorchas* provided an early grant to match PLALA funds for local awards, and then launched its own annual competition for microfilming projects. *Fundación Polar*, in Venezuela, matched PLALA's grant for microfilming work in the *Archivo General del Estado Mérida*. *MacArthur Foundation* funds are supporting conservation training for Cuban archivists. Perhaps most significant are some newly created grant programs with very similar goals.⁶
- Several PLALA grants have served as catalysts for more ambitious initiatives. Mexico's *Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán* provides a dramatic example: a PLALA award that provided limited climate control in the stacks was fairly quickly followed by a much larger, state-funded project to air-condition the entire facility.

Publicity, matching grants, and supplemental project support have all enhanced PLALA's impact. The program has had other effects as well. Successful projects have inspired many grantees to intensify their own efforts and also to seek additional external support. Workshop presentations, project demonstrations, and training sessions have spread skills, knowledge of standards, and new perspectives on cataloging and preservation. Other repositories have as a result been motivated to emulate specific activities and also to draft their own project proposals.

The program's application process, finally, forces candidates to evaluate their programs and needs, plan their projects, and articulate detailed work plans and budgets. Self-awareness, familiarity with a larger context of standards and possibilities, and planning skills all come into play. Many proposals

6. See the discussion below under "Additional Sponsors."

are refined through informal communications and coaching. Even unsuccessful applicants can learn from the process.

Questions and Possibilities

The Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives has brought direct benefits to its grantees. Broader cross sections of individuals and institutions concerned with the region's documentary heritage have been affected as well. The program's experience also reveals several persistent questions, as well as new possibilities for response. Matters of scope, priority, and politics all come into play.

1. *Scope of collections.* The program has supported projects concerning sound recordings, video, and photographs. Print and manuscript materials have nonetheless enjoyed pride of place. Different projects have addressed sources from the colonial period to the late twentieth century, though materials that are old or fragile have tended to receive priority. It has sometimes been difficult to assess the long-term research value of nonprint materials and of unprocessed collections.
2. *Digital reformatting.* Scholars, librarians, and archivists, like everyone else, are enamored of the digitized materials now available in CD-ROMs and on the Internet. Many PLALA applicants have proposed scanning projects, typically in order to enhance user access while removing original sources from harm's way. But "best practices" and standards for digital reformatting require long-term commitments of time, cash, and technical expertise. Our applicants, by contrast, tend to be small institutions with very limited resources. The program has taken a conservative approach, approving only a few trial projects.
3. *Standards.* Projects funded by PLALA are expected to embrace, or at least move toward, contemporary technical standards in order to ensure that the work is done right and that the results will endure. The trade-offs, however, are not always simple. Properly housed preservation microfilm, for example, is expected to last for hundreds of years. This life expectancy, however, assumes compliance with the rather complicated standards that apply to preservation microfilming and film storage.⁷ Many Latin American institutions simply can't meet these

7. Microform masters should be stored in stable environments with a temperature below 65°F and relative humidity of 35%, +/-5%. An overview of microfilming standards

expectations; even when the standards are known and understood, they're often extremely difficult (and expensive) to implement. A variety of responses might make sense:

- Full compliance may require efforts involving more than one institution. Argentina's Antorchas Foundation, for instance, has sponsored a sophisticated microfilm storage facility at the Area de Investigación y Documentación Histórica "Parque de España" in Rosario. Operating costs are high, and some would-be clients are therefore tempted to store (improperly) their own film masters. Both Antorchas and PLALA have therefore sought to build appropriate storage requirements into their criteria for microfilming projects. Full compliance might also be achieved through partnerships with foreign institutions. Duplicate negatives, for example, might be deposited in remote but archivally appropriate storage vaults. The mutual trust, economic arrangements, and legal documents needed for such arrangements are by and large not yet in place.
- Another, fuzzier option looks to new kinds of approaches. The climate control systems needed for microfilm storage in most of Latin America, for instance, are based on expensive machinery that runs nonstop.⁸ But experiments are now underway to determine whether adequate results might be attained simply by shrink-wrapping chemically stable microfilm. Latin American institutions might explore new ground in this and other areas.
- Capitulation, of sorts, may be a final alternative. Latin America's track record with preservation microfilm is not at all strong: local film has often lasted only a few decades. Well-conducted digitizing projects might therefore serve just as well. Only a few repositories command the necessary resources and expertise to carry these out. Nonetheless, the practical alternatives may suggest different solutions from what more theoretical arguments would indicate.

Similar analyses might apply to some aspects of both cataloging and conservation. On the other hand, the program's efforts to ensure high stan-

is included in the Northeast Document Conservation Center's technical leaflet "Reformatting—Microfilm and Microfiche," available at <http://www.nedcc.org/plam3/tleaf51.htm>.

8. Many U.S. microfilm masters are stored underground, in abandoned mines or specially constructed facilities, where ambient conditions are close to those mandated by the standards.

dards are almost always welcome. The emphasis on quality and permanence also carries spillover effects as new knowledge is shared around.

4. *Consortia*. PLALA's grants have focused on individual institutions. A few projects, such as CIRMA's microfilming laboratory, anticipate a broader impact as services are provided more widely. While true cooperative projects have not yet emerged, some activities may be best envisioned on a consortial scale. Conducting research for new or alternative standards is a case in point. Boosting the viability of high quality reformatting service bureaus, or microfilm storage vaults like the facility in Rosario, Argentina, is another. Union catalogs or cooperative indexes by their nature draw from several institutions. These kinds of projects are likely to require more generous support, perhaps leading to cooperative funding arrangements as well.
5. *Counterpart contributions*. Many funding agencies require matching payments to prove that recipients are fully committed to their projects. PLALA, however, focuses on modest efforts involving endangered resources in marginal repositories. Matching payments are rarely required, though a few counterpart contributions have been negotiated with particularly affluent institutions. The risk of lost resources, in other words, outweighs the dangers of poor project performance. The equation may change as larger projects and consortial initiatives come into play.
6. *Additional sponsors*. Risk can also be spread by enlarging the pool of funding organizations. PLALA has attracted several additional sponsors for some of its projects. Some independent initiatives have emerged as well. International organizations, including the World Bank, the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Development Bank, and UNESCO (through its "Memory of the World" program), have expressed their (primarily rhetorical) interest in Latin America's documentary heritage. Spain, by contrast, has sponsored a concrete and very substantial "Programa de Apoyo al Desarrollo de Archivos Iberoamericanos" (Programa ADAI). This five-year effort, launched in 1999, offers competitive grants of up to \$20,000 for archival projects. ADAI's member countries contribute modest participation fees, though archives in other Latin American countries can present projects as well.⁹

9. See the Programa's Web site: <http://www.mcu.es/lab/archivos/Adai/>.

A more limited Central American initiative is now taking shape at Tulane University.¹⁰

7. *Internationalization?* PLALA is nimble, its overhead is low, and its administrative structure is lean. Its management and evaluation committee are also exclusively North American. International communications, even in this age of e-mail and fax machines, remain costly and complex. Adding Latin American scholars or librarians to the Program Committee would require additional staff support and therefore reduce the funds available for project work. The most effective blend of efficiency and collaboration, however, is not yet clear.

Conclusion

The Program for Latin American Libraries and Archives has had significant impacts, direct and indirect, throughout the region and also among other funding agencies. Its activities are not constrained by the priorities or mandates of any single university or agency, allowing flexible approaches and funding arrangements. Its most telling effects are apparent through the projects that it continues to support.

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10. See <http://www.tulane.edu/~clas/html/history.htm>, under "Title VI National Resource Center," for a brief statement of goals.