

THE ILASSA CONFERENCE: TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS SHOWCASING STUDENTS

by MICHAEL MEYER



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TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS. THAT'S HOW LONG the Institute of Latin American Studies Student Association's (ILASSA's) Annual Student Conference on Latin America has been an important event at the University of Texas at Austin. *Twenty-eight*

years. That makes the conference older than most of the students. Like those students, the conference has grown and matured in ways that would make any parent proud. In fact, how could we *not* take pride in an event that has become the most prestigious and distinguished of its kind?

Over its history, the ILASSA Conference has brought together hundreds of students from UT and throughout the hemisphere—and thousands of Latin America enthusiasts—to share ideas, present research, and discuss issues at the forefront of Latin American scholarship. In its twenty-eight years the event has evolved from humble beginnings to the prestigious, professional event it is today, with faculty-moderated panels, internationally respected speakers, and a diverse array of student presenters. Alumni of the conference have gone on to be movers-and-shakers in the world of Latin American scholarship, politics, and business. These accomplishments are more than enough to put a glint in any “parent’s” eye.

ILASSA—the conference’s “proud parent”—is excited to report that the 2008 event brought approximately eighty-five undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students from thirteen countries and eleven states to UT, and saw a total attendance exceeding four hundred. No fewer than thirteen students made their very first trip to the U.S. to present at the conference, and more than forty individuals visited UT for the first time in order to attend. Renata Moreno from Colombia was one of these. She said that for her the experience was “extremely enriching” in ways she never thought possible.

But it’s not all berries and roses. As an ILASSA-run conference, the work of planning the event falls on graduate students already stretched

thin by their many responsibilities. An estimated two thousand hours of work are required to realize the event, with the bulk of this falling on a core group of fewer than twenty people. After each conference’s cathartic Fiesta de Despedida, attention turns to the next year: How do we convince ourselves that the work is worth it? In the face of our exhaustion we ask, why would we possibly want to do this again?

It’s actually a remarkably easy question to answer, because when the conference happens, everybody “wins.” Through the ILASSA Conference, the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies—already the premier Latin American Studies institute in the country—is made visible to the world of Latin American scholarship in ways otherwise inaccessible. The conference enhances the academic environment within the institute, and marks it with a special source of pride and distinction. The institute can boast an extremely active and engaged student body, which gives it unique angles for recruitment and fundraising. What’s more, visitors from across the U.S. and the hemisphere go home with powerful experiences and images associated with Latin American Studies at UT.

The conference means just as much, if not more, to the UT students who organize it. Those students benefit from the opportunity to put themselves to work in areas like logistics, finances, hospitality, and abstract evaluation. When they graduate, they leave with honed professional skills and with laudable achievements made not just inside the classroom, but outside it—with a sense that they accomplished something internationally meaningful. All institute students benefit from the conference inasmuch as they begin their worklife as graduates of a distinguished program whose reputation and image are enhanced by the conference, its long history, and its prestige.

As for presenters and attendees, this is where the ILASSA Conference may offer its greatest “payoff.” Through panel discussions, plenary addresses, “brown bag” discussion groups, and other happenings, emerging scholars explore their academic potential and build

their networks in what one presenter called a “friendly and constructive environment.” This has helped launch numerous aspiring academics and professionals into their fields. Kurt Weyland, now the Lozano Long Professor of Latin American Politics in the Department of Government at UT Austin, says:

“My first conference participation ever was at ILASSA in 1986, when I was an M.A. student at LILAS. Two experiences had a lasting impact on me. First, I read my paper, literally, and my advisor ‘got on my case’ for that—so I’ve never done it again! Second, I met an M.A. student from the University of Florida, Gainesville, who presented a great paper (he did not read it)—Timothy Power. We became friends, ended up sharing an apartment during our doctoral field research in Brazil, and have stayed in close professional and personal contact ever since; for instance, I wrote a chapter for a book that Tim coedited (*Democratic Brazil*, Pittsburgh 2000), and we regularly get together at conferences. Tim now teaches at the University of Oxford! Thus, ILASSA really made a difference—actually, two differences—for my academic career.”

His sentiments are shared by Felipe Nunes, master’s student at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil, who has similar praise:

“Participating in the Annual ILASSA Student Conference was a wonderful opportunity ... I went twice to the conference—in 2006 and 2007—and I now encourage my colleagues in Brazil to send papers to the event. Everything about the conference earns our congratulations.... After my experience in Austin, I organized the meeting of the Academic Center of Social Science in the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in 2006, trying to replicate the good things that I saw at the ILASSA

Conference... The event brought me academic, professional, and social benefits that I will remember for a very long time.”

Participants in the conference also benefit from the social connections they make. About thirty-five foreign visitors each year stay with UT students and other conference supporters. Presenters have repeatedly praised this practice for making the conference more affordable, and giving them a chance to develop and sustain friendships with people from their own country and others. Lúcio Bittencourt of the Fundação Getulio Vargas said, “It’s so great being here, and meeting all these people. Not just from the U.S., but Brazilians from all over the country!”

All of us—the institute, ILASSA members and conference organizers, and conference participants—profit immeasurably from the chance to interact with the conference’s plenary speakers and to hear their powerful words. Some of the great minds of our time have spoken at the ILASSA Conference, including political and social leaders, authors, and prominent Latin American scholars such as Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Monsivais, and Benedita da Silva. In 2008, Lucas Benitez from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) delivered the opening address. The CIW is responsible for a historic agreement in the campaign for fair food with the corporate giants Yum Brands and McDonald’s and was honored with Anti-Slavery International’s Anti-Slavery Award in 2007.

The closing address was given by Dr. Carlos Gaviria, the leader of Colombia’s Polo Democrático Alternativo and 2006 presidential candidate. As president and justice of the Colombian Constitutional Court, Dr. Gaviria played a key role in the implementation of

legal pluralism in his country. He now heads the coalition of opposition parties in Colombia. Renata Moreno said of his visit: “Getting to know Carlos Gaviria personally was marvelous because even though we’re from the same country, I’d never had the chance get to know him or talk with him. I never imagined how respected he would be in the United States, which is great because he is someone I admire profoundly” (translation by author).

These things are what make the effort worth it. In light of the many benefits the ILASSA Conference brings to its organizers and participants, and to the institute and UT, the seemingly grueling work of putting it together looks more like an easy labor of love. Each year the project of realizing this extraordinary conference—both an impressive feat and a mammoth task—is passed to a new and eager generation of Latin American Studies students. They will continue to grow, professionalize, and improve the event, building support and enthusiasm for this conference that has been so meaningful to so many people, and they will continue to make fellow students, faculty, staff, and alumni proud.

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NOTE: The ILASSA Conference is made possible and successful by the work, support, and financial backing of countless individuals, departments, businesses, and institutions, to whom we are eternally grateful. Papers from previous conferences are available on LANIC (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/>), and the program for ILASSA 28 can be downloaded at http://www.utexas.edu/cola/insts/lililas/conferences/ilassa_08/program/. ☀



1) Joel Perez of the Proyecto Defensa Laboral introduces Lucas Benitez at the opening plenary session of ILASSA 28. 2) Lucas Benitez of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers delivers the conference’s opening address. 3) Zoila Cleaver and other attendees at the opening plenary session. (Photos by Jon Huang)