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ESSAYS

## A Transcultural Experiment: U.S. Latino Studies at UTS

**Paul Allatson**

University of Technology Sydney

**Corresponding author:** Associate Professor Paul Allatson, Industry Fellow, School of International Studies and Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney, Australia, ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2248-1605>, [Paul.Allatson@uts.edu.au](mailto:Paul.Allatson@uts.edu.au)

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### Abstract

In 2001, shortly after I joined as a newly minted academic the Institute for International Studies at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), the then founder and Director of the program, Professor David Goodman, approached me to canvas the possibility of a Latino USA Major in the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) degree. These are my reflections on this transcultural experiment in international studies at UTS.

### Keywords

**BAIS; UTS; In-Country Study; Latino Studies; Study Abroad**

In 2001, shortly after I joined the Institute for International Studies at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) as a newly minted academic, the then founder and Director of the program, Professor David Goodman, approached me to canvas the possibility of a Latino USA Major in the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) degree. This was in recognition of my own interests in the field of Latino Studies since my PhD research. The idea made provocative sense. What if we as a university, located in Sydney Australia, reconceived the USA from a Latino perspective, that is from the viewpoints and worldviews of people from the USA's Latino heterogeneous communities, commonly referred to by business and government interests as Hispanics? That reconception would mean—at pedagogical and inter-institutional levels—challenging orthodox Australian university understandings of a country, the USA, English-speaking and Australia's main ally, so that Australian students studying a degree that

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required one year abroad, would spend two semesters in the USA attached to universities with robust Latino Studies programs, and in cities where Latinos have significant populations, and studying Spanish as the requisite language for the BAIS. As far as we knew, and this still holds, no such program outside the USA existed at that time.

We recognised that the proposed program would not be as popular as sites across Western Europe and East Asia, which were where a majority of our Australian students opted to study each year. Nonetheless we felt that a compelling case could be made that would attract a cohort of students intrigued by the prospect of learning about the USA from its largest minority's heterogeneous perspectives. Accordingly, the Latino USA major, as we called it, was pitched to students in this way:

The Latino USA Major is based on the premise that the USA is one of the world's most-important Spanish-speaking countries, being the second largest Spanish-speaking country after Mexico. Already in many cities, Spanish has joined English as a de facto second language, and in some parts of the USA, Spanish has or is approaching majority status. It is estimated that by 2050 Latinos will comprise more than 25 percent of the US population.

The Latino USA Major is designed for students to learn about and experience at first hand the demographic, transcultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and political impact of latinization in the USA. The Major prepares students for understanding how those latinizing processes will transform the USA, and how other parts of the world regard and relate to that nation, in the 21st century. Students who select this major will be taking advantage of the current demographic, cultural and linguistic transformation of the USA, giving them important skills for any professional area conducted in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Latino USA major allows students to learn Spanish, to learn about the history and cultures of the USA's diverse Latino sectors, and to spend an academic year of study at universities in parts of the USA with large Latino populations. The major focuses on the 'core' and longest established Latino sectors: Chicanos and Mexican Americans, the largest Latino populations, swelled by continuing mass migration from Mexico; mainland Puerto Ricans; and Cuban Americans.

Logistically there were challenges. First, the Major needed to slot into the existing International Studies structure—which included compulsory language specialisation—hence the Spanish language focus was pivotal. Second, the USA was a popular destination for UTS students who were undertaking a semester of exchange in English at one of our partner universities in the country; accordingly, places were limited and highly sought after. Goodwill and flexibility, and solid relations with the university's International Office that oversaw student exchange arrangements, were thus vital in ensuring that our BAIS students had access to the requisite number of places while they undertook their In-Country Study year in the USA. In the early stages of the Major existing student exchange partner universities were identified: San Diego State University, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Miami. Over time, more sites were added to the list of choices: University of Texas at El Paso, University of New Mexico, California State University, Sacramento.

The Latino USA Major, like all the Majors in the BAIS—a combined degree with other professional options from across the university—was structured tightly to best prepare students for their year of In-Country Study. Latino USA students undertook four semesters of Spanish language classes at appropriate levels, an introductory subject (course) on international studies concepts and developments, and a specially designed subject, Contemporary Latino USA, conceived as per the following:

**Contemporary Latino USA** is a lecture and seminar program that introduces students to the historical, geopolitical, and transcultural coordinates of the heterogeneous Latino population

in the USA. That population makes the USA the second largest Spanish-speaking country after Mexico. Latino refers to anyone born, raised, or resident in the USA who comes from or who has antecedents in the Spanish-speaking Latin Americas, though we also attend relationally to other Latin American national and ethnic communities (Brazilian, Haitian) as well as diasporic Indigenous communities with origins in Latin American countries. The term Latino normally covers the same aggregate of peoples that fall under the Hispanic term, but is widely preferred by Latinos to the latter designation. The core historical Latino sectors are: Chicanos and Mexican Americans (the largest Latino populations, swelled by continuing mass migration from Mexico); Puerto Ricans; and Cuban Americans. Other substantial Latino sectors are: Dominicans; Central Americans (notably El Salvadoreans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans); and South Americans (notably Colombians, Ecuadorians, Peruvians, Venezuelans, and people from the Southern Cone states).

**Contemporary Latino USA** focuses on the three core historical Latino sectors with attention paid to the other established communities. The subject places Latino communities in specific historical, political and cultural contexts, as well as in relation to “latinization,” a term increasingly used to describe the profound impact of Latinos on US political structures, the US economy, and US culture, from literature, film and music to language and mass media. The subject also links US latinization to broader processes of transnationalization, globalization, and transculturation.

**Contemporary Latino USA** encourages students to develop multidisciplinary critical skills that will allow them to identify the major contemporary issues at work in Latino USA. The subject requires no prior knowledge of Latino USA or of the Spanish language.

The subject’s objectives were itemised as follows:

- Students will be introduced to contemporary Latino USA history, economics, politics, cultures and societies, as well as to national convergences and divergences in these areas.
- Students will gain insights into Latino USA’s diversity and heterogeneity in national, continental and international contexts.
- Students will develop a critical appreciation for societies outside Australia.
- Students will be exposed to ideas that challenge US-centric modes of thinking, and that draw attention to the legacies of imperialism, colonisation, and transnational capitalism and their impact on contemporary Latinos.
- Students will develop critical thinking skills relevant to the multidisciplinary nature of the subject.

As with all other Majors (country specialisations) in the BAIS, students undertaking the year of In-Country Study spent two semesters at a partner university in the USA, completing courses in Spanish language, and depending on the site, Latino Studies, Chicano Studies, Cuban Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, Caribbean Studies, Immigration Studies and/or Border Studies. In addition to attending and passing host university courses, students were asked in their first semester to complete a self-reflective Cultural Report of some feature of the host country that they found surprising, and to revisit that topic at the end of their second semester. In addition, carefully scaffolded assessment tasks ([Giovanangeli & Allatson 2022](#)) to do with building up research capacity lead over the year to a major piece of research into an aspect of local Latino culture that required students to engage (outside libraries) with members of the local Latino community. The research project was described for students as follows:

The project is a major independent study, conducted using two social science or humanities research methods, that investigates a topic of the student’s choosing related to the host society. It involves

conducting empirical research (based on observation or experiment, deriving knowledge from experience) and analysing these findings to inform speculative conclusions about phenomena within the host society. Feedback from previous research assessments and guidance from the academic supervisor should inform the research design, analysis of findings and presentation of results.

These assessment tasks were marked by academic staff back at UTS.

A selection of research topics over the years indicates the diversity of student interests as they came to terms with thinking about the USA from Latino perspectives: the Integration of Puerto Ricans into Miami Society; race relations in Miami; racial segregation on university campuses and its implications for Latino student success; the impact of feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, México, on El Paso; the children of undocumented migrants and the travails of citizenship; economic impacts of NAFTA on US-Mexico border communities; barriers to the sociocultural acceptance of Cubans in Miami; the marketing of Miami as the de facto ‘capital’ of Latin America and its influence on pan-Latino relations; the impact of Cuban immigration on Miami; the differential receptions of Cubans and Haitians in Miami; El Paso’s economic sustainability in relation to Mexico; HIV and AIDS along the US-Mexican border: a media analysis; Immigrant Mexican women’s health; bilingualism in San Diego County; gentefication in San Diego; the legal struggles of undocumented migrants in Austin.

The range of topics reflects the multidisciplinary nature of the student cohort, given that students came from all UTS faculties, and thus were also undertaking studies in a professional degree program: engineering, IT, science, law, business, design, communication, education and nursing. The pedagogical rationale was that students would select a research topic that aligned with their personal interests and professional knowledge, rather than have topics imposed on them. With guidance from UTS academic staff by distance, as well as site visits, students gradually worked their project ideas through an initial proposal, literature review, and methodological analysis, before completing their final drafts.

Since the Latino USA Major was intended to challenge preconceptions about the USA among the Australian student cohort, the feedback from students was telling. Of the Contemporary Latino USA subject one student wrote: ‘I can’t believe how little I knew about Latinas/os at the beginning of semester! It’s going to be so useful next year on ICS and hopefully I’ll continue to learn more.’ Another student wrote: ‘I have been opened up to another world I was previously unaware of. Not only have I become more aware of the Latino population of the USA, but also the issues they are facing and more importantly the issues the generations in the future will face.’ Another opined: ‘I’ve really enjoyed this subject. It’s changed a lot of my stereotypes.’ Even elective students found the Contemporary Latino USA subject paradigm changing: ‘I was in your Latino USA class a few years ago and I just wanted to let you know that I enjoyed it so much, and was so inspired, that I have gone on to do postgrad work at the US Studies Centre (University of Sydney) which I am really enjoying.’

*Postscript:* UTS’s Latino USA Major experiment in international studies ended with the restructuring of the BAIS into the new Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) in the wake of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021, and the resultant curtailment of international travel, that saw the smaller Majors across the Americas disbanded.

## Reference

Giovanangeli, A. & Allatson, P. 2022, ‘Scaffolded Fieldwork Research Projects: An Australian Approach to Study Abroad,’ *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, vol. 34, no. 2: 92–111. <https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v34i2.544>