

**Transcript – LACS 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Oral History Night**  
**March 27, 2024**

**Lori Flores:** I wanted to say welcome to everybody; thank you so much for being here. Thank you to our Oral History seminar students for filming the conversation tonight. I wanted to bring us together not only to create this beautiful reunion, but I think it's really politically important to capture LACS as a center, and its history as a center that came into being through much struggle and fight to be a home on campus for Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean students here at Stony Brook, and faculty and staff.

As we come upon 30 years of existence here, it has not been met with increasing financial support from our university. In fact, we are struggling to keep such funding consistent, and it's constantly being renegotiated. So I felt creating a short film from this group conversation - about what Stony Brook looked like before LACS was founded in 1994, through 30 years of serving communities here at Stony Brook, to what comes next - my goal is to have a short film edited from what we talk about today, and housed in Special Collections. Also, I'd like this video to show our present and future administrations at the university that we always have been important to students, and LACS deserves a lot more recognition and resources for doing the work that we do. If we could go around and briefly introduce ourselves, that would be great.

**Paul Gootenberg:** I was the director of LACS from 2000-2006 and a caretaker [director] for a few years.

**Allen Wells:** I would be part of the pre-history of LACS. I was here [as a History PhD student] in the '70s. I came in '73 and I graduated in '79, and I've taught at two places since then, Appalachian State in North Carolina and then 31 years at Bowdoin College in Maine. I retired in 2019.

**Brooke Larson:** I am in the History Department, an Emeritus as of a couple years ago. I was director of LACS from 1993-1997, the first 3-year director. Basically, I was here when the foundations were laid. It's a great idea to have this retrospective.

**Christopher Luna:** I'm a recent graduate from Stony Brook with a LACS Minor. I'm an immigration law paralegal. I'm very much connected with the Long Island immigrant community. I myself am an immigrant. I think LACS and the work that it does and the classes that we were able to take [for the minor] were incredibly important especially given the demographic makeup of the place that we're in. I'm excited to be around incredibly smart people who I've had the privilege to take classes with.

**Eric Zolov:** I'm in the History Department in Latin American history, and for many years worked with Brooke and Paul and now they're abandoning me to retirement (laughter). I'm the last one standing, but hopefully will have a new colleague soon. I was director of LACS from 2016-2019, I believe. It's really wonderful that you (Lori) had the foresight to do this for the 30th anniversary.

**Marc Anthony Rodriguez:** I am a graduate of '05 with a LACS Minor. I took some classes with Dr. Gootenberg. I take a lot of memories from LACS. I graduated with a philosophy degree and I've been in interactive entertainment for going on 20 years now. I'm also an entrepreneur, trying to invest in the Latino community to make sure we have more representation, and I try to push for as much diverse thoughts and pasión or fuego or fire in all facets of interactive entertainment and media. I am very emotional to be around all of you, and thank you very much.

**Lynda Perdomo Ayala:** I am an administrator; I was one until December and I started my career here in this building (SBS) up in Economics working on healthcare finance in Latin America and the Caribbean. I was also the advisor to LASO and therefore one of the founding members of the LACS Center, driven by the work that the students wanted to accomplish on this campus, and other faculty who have been here. I want to continue our growth, as Christopher pointed out, in a community where we are [here in Suffolk County] the second largest population of Latinos outside New York City in the state of New York.

**Flores:** I'm the current director of LACS, [and have been in the role] since 2022. I've been a faculty member here in Stony Brook since 2012. I remember when I was coming up for this job and so excited about it. As soon as I saw LACS, I thought "I want to direct that one day." And now 10 years later, it was my turn, and it's been an honor. It's been so lovely to build upon the wisdom of other people and that's also another reason to bring us together today, because this took effort from a lot of different people, and so many layers of work.

I wanted to start out the conversation by asking Lynda but also Allen, because you two are kind of reflecting the pre-history of LACS's official integration as a program, as a minor. What did doing and supporting Latin American and Caribbean studies and students look like at Stony Brook before 1994? What did being an undergraduate and graduate student look like?

**Perdomo-Ayala:** When I arrived here in the '80s, there was very little that was going on for the students... they were cobbling together [events and activities] as best as they could. There was always this threat that they would not get the funding that they were supposed to be getting [for their Latin American Student Organization, or LASO]. They were told they would get X number of dollars, and there would be some major dialogue with the student government because they didn't get what they were supposed to be getting. That was the impetus for LACS. We started to do Hispanic Heritage Month because we felt that was a way of bringing out our culture and our history, and for students to connect with that. Many of us who worked here came from NYC and the program Respira that connects Latinos with their culture and background; that was something that I had been very much involved with. And I had also been president of LASO at Adelphi as an undergrad.

So, coming here I met Dr. Emile Adams, Vice Provost for Student Affairs. He said, 'Oh wow, you're here, and you do this? Maybe you want to be the advisor [of LASO]' because he was doing the advising. I said sure. I started finding students were a little unhappy with the fact that they didn't have like, La Casa, or a place that they could call home that they could be at. We had that at Adelphi because we had a Puerto Rican studies program. It turned out that [Stony

Brook] had a Puerto Rican studies program back in the '70s through the early '80s and it had been shut down, typical of the times, where there wasn't a lot of funding....

The students complained [about the availability of relevant classes] and [I took] the bulletin, in paper at the time, and circled every department on campus and said to them, 'Listen, there's stuff going on in Marine Sciences that's about the Caribbean, so it's a matter of you looking through the catalog and picking out things that attract you. And then of course I went to my office and complained vigorously to my chair, Bryce Hool, and he entertained me and let me blow off steam which was great. And every time I came back from a meeting and I was blowing off steam, he was listening and absorbing all that. And Andy Policano, our Dean at the time, was a really phenomenal person and someone who was open to dialogue. Bryce suggested I go and see Andy, so I did, and we had a nice conversation. I explained to him students' concern. Ironically, very shortly after that Andy left, but Bryce became the Dean of CAS. So I was torturing the right individuals at the time (laughter) because as I was doing that, they were growing in the institution. So [Bryce] was more than happy to support [a future LACS] and to be forthcoming with trying to do the best he could to bring that to fruition. So I really have to credit those two administrators because they had the wherewithal to create the underpinnings to get that going.

But I think the students had much to say and they were very - in those days because it was the '80s - they were left over from the '70s and I was one of those '60s/70s babies who was protesting on campus. They did the same. If they had to say something, they said it. They weren't quiet about it, and I think that speaks volumes to what helped bring [LACS] to fruition.

**Flores:** Allen, what do you remember of the time? What was it like to be a graduate student at Stony Brook studying Latin America?

**Wells:** I think the program was young at that time. Stanley Ross came in '62 and he was a historian of Mexico. Within a year he was named Dean, and for the next 5 years he did an amazing job of building up the library here. I benefited from that tremendously....he also hired very well. Bob Levine '66, Franklin Knight after that; some of them didn't stay for long. I would say the situation was very fluid. When I came, there were four faculty members who worked in Latin American history in the history department, so that was very startling to me.

I came without any money so I needed a job to go through grad school here, typical story, and there was a director of the Ibero-American studies program, which I guess we could argue is a predecessor of LACS, and George Schuyler was the director, wonderful man, who found me a job in the library, in collection development, and saved me. And he taught a course on Latin American film, and he made me the TA. We were using 16 mm film at the time, and I think I broke every film we showed there because I had no idea what I was doing (laughter).

I would say there was a lot of faculty coming in for a year or two and leaving, and maybe Paul Gootenberg can speak to this more, but that [faculty] stability didn't take place until the '80s after I left, when Brooke came and Barbara [Weinstein] was here, at least in the Latin American

history program. And I was here at a time during the last years of the Vietnam War which was an interesting time to be here, in the sense that if you were male and you had a low lottery number...we had a very large cohort in the history program here with many people for the 2-S deferment. The war lasted until '75 and the lottery ended a little bit before that. I had a very long number so, you know, a lot of the people/grad students in the history department left me after '75, the program shrunk. I think I was the third student to get a PhD in Latin American history. The first was Frank Sampanero who I think worked with Ross initially, and then when Ross went to UT Austin to be provost there, somebody else was his mentor. And then the second was Chris Rounds. Both Frank and Chris worked on Mexico as I did, and Chris graduated in '77 and then I graduated in '79. There was no Mexicanist while I was here, and I was working on the Yucatán, the Porfiriato, so I worked with Steve Stein, a Peruvianist who came in '74 and he was great. And Clara Lida—when I got over how intimidating she was, she was great, she really helped me a lot. I got that help here [at Stony Brook] and I've been very grateful for the education I got here.

I'll say one more thing: one of the nice things that Stony Brook did for me - when I came back from the field in '77, they made it possible for me to teach one seminar in the spring semester for two years, to give me some teaching experience. I wasn't living on Long Island at that point, I was living upstate, and that made it possible for me to finish [my dissertation and degree]. I was taking the bus down here and preparing on the bus for my seminar. Without that, I don't know if I would have finished. Between the help and support I got from the faculty here, and that the program was great.

We were here for the first "9/11" in 1973, when the coup took place in Chile. One interesting thing in the history department was that there were a lot of exiles leaving Chile and the history department took in some graduate students, including one not to be forgotten, Juan O'Brien. He was hysterical, and talked so much about what it was like in Chile during that time. I think [history professor] Joel Rosenthal was involved in doing that; it sounds like something Joel would do, he was such a great guy.

**Flores:** I did want to begin talking about directorships under the different eras at the center, beginning with Brooke. What were some of the big points or memories that stick in your mind, the highs and the lows of each directorship?

**Larson:** I can talk about the lows! (laughter) The high was that we had the chance to form LACS in the first place, and that partly came about because of the chemistry of the deans and talking to Lynda. I didn't know that she was softening the deans to begin to think about this. But also apparently there was a recognition that there was this little cluster of Latin Americanists in Hispanic Languages and History. So there was this [realization that] we've got strength in the faculty here, we should do something. And Stony Brook was becoming a little more diverse, with a Latino community that was beginning to find its voice with Lynda and Carla Vasquez, Dean of Students....

**Perdomo-Ayala:** There was a period where we had a lot of middle management individuals who were Latinos, so we had ties with financial aid, the dean of students, Dani de la Campa was the head of student services over at health services, and she was married to Román, the head of Hispanic Languages.

**Larson:** We really needed them because there was resistance to this, you know, this was an area studies program. We didn't have very many interdisciplinary programs at Stony Brook. So discussions began with Bryce Hool around a table about what we should do. And it was decided that Ian Roxborough would do a holding action [as director] for a year; he was actually shifting out of Latin America into global studies. So [the directorship] fell to me probably because I had experience at the SSRC [Social Science Research Council in NYC] and had administrative experience.

I was director from '93 to '97, and that was the building stage [of LACS] I would say, building the foundations figuratively and physically. I will always be grateful to the History Department for giving us this [seminar] room and giving us one of their offices to create a lounge. Then we needed furniture. Lynda helped us get hand-me-down furniture from the medical school and we furnished this room. And then we got a hand-me-down crappy old computer that Norma [Reyes] arranged, who became the very first administrator [for LACS], part time, she had just graduated. So we had what we needed, plus a little tiny budget of \$12,000 a year which at the time was thought to be generous.

So that's what we began with - and we began working with a faculty staff advisory board, we set that up right away. There was great active, proactive work by Lynda and Carmen, and the minor was created from the very get-go. In those days we had enough faculty support to be able to teach a core course for minors and we teamed up - somebody from HLL and somebody from History - and we co-taught. That went on for two years and then they [admin] took that away, [because they said we] "couldn't afford it." But the minor began, and that was really important to have a presence on campus. We began to build the graduate student strength too. We were very lucky; it partly came from some of my connections to SSRC, we got - in the '80s - a stream of grad students from Lima, Santiago, and Buenos Aires. We already had a group of Colombian students and a couple of Peruvian students that Steve Stein had brought. So we had a core group of faculty through the '80s that really flourished, that put our program in [Latin American] history on the map, and that was the reason that Paul [Gootenberg] agreed to come. Right, Paul?

**Gootenberg:** Well, you hired me! (laughs)

**Larson:** We hired you, but you were interested [in Stony Brook] because of the wonderful grad students. That was great; that gave us the spirit. It wasn't just a grad program to give PhDs to gringos to go teach in small colleges. It was a program that was attracting fairly seasoned scholars - many of them high school teachers [in Latin America], many of them who had already done research in archives - so they could go back and become professors there. By the time the

'90s came around, they were very central to this whole endeavor and to the spirit of LACS. It was a very transnational sort of spirit.

In the first three years, we started the speaker series. We brought in senior people from across the disciplines. One of the first people to come was June Nash, a well-known anthropologist who's no longer with us. She came and gave a talk about her fieldwork and by then she was working with miners in Bolivia...the other person we brought in the first year was a leading historian of Latin American women, Asunción Lavrin from Howard University. People like that, it was just stunning to have them. And the other thing we did - the art shows began, and that was great, because that was when we could invite the Dean, the Provost, the President....and that really helped us put LACS on their radar, because the first art shows showed we were reaching out across the whole campus. [LACS] wasn't just a center that was about scholarship, but art and culture and identity and politics. We wanted to do some serious fundraising and with the alumni and the development office, we put together a luncheon for the person who was running for Bronx borough president at the time.

**Perdomo-Ayala:** The chemistry building had an actual dining room for faculty and staff only, and so we invited him and we invited Lisa Wendell, who was a founding member of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce here on Long Island.

**Larson:** And I believe the President [of Stony Brook] came to that. So that was very exciting. The spirit of the place was very lively and not just narrowly academic, and the connections with the student and staff on campus was partly what made it work.

**Norma Reyes:** When I started [working for LACS] as a newly graduated alum, I was very connected with the student body. Being "part time" staff didn't really mean anything, because student events happen in the evening, so most of my time in the afterhours was spent going to their events and promoting LACS. And it became el centro, it became the sort of home for these students. When they couldn't find a spot to study, they would come over to us. We would have hours when they could come. We would have a pot of café, whatever we had, but it was creating that sense of community for many students. You know, we didn't have a place that we could call our own. At that time, we had the immigrant cultural center, but it was sort of in the dorms, and not everybody was able to get there at different hours, so this was centralized.

And so I kind of became the face for the students for the Center and many times it helped us because they actually saw the support, right? We supported their things in the evening, and we wanted them to support us in the day hours for our activities, so it was a nice bridge....even after I left LACS, we had Beatrice Cruz who also came in as an administrator; same thing, she had a connection with the students. And that was always our thing: How do we bridge to the students, how do we bridge to the other disciplines, and not just to [Latino] students, just students in general who were interested, whether it was about the art shows or opportunities. We exposed them to [scholars/speakers] who normally wouldn't cross their path, and here they are at Stony Brook, and here's the center bringing them here and here was the opportunity to be a participant in that.

**Perdomo-Ayala:** And to add to that, the Hispanic Heritage Month Committee used to have its meetings here, which was really great, because it had that sense of community and it felt comfortable being in here. During that period we expanded HHM to have a luncheon and whoever the keynote speaker was, we would have that individual have lunch with Latino students that were either on LASO's executive board or part of the Latino fraternities and sororities, which also started during the '90s.

The '90s was a great period for Hispanic activity to explode on the campus. Somebody like Felipe Luciano, who was one of the members of the Young Lords Party, was one of the speakers, so that was the caliber of individuals we had. Jay Delgado, who still is very much involved in Washington and the national level in terms of health and wellness of Hispanics on campus. Luis Zayas, who's provost now at the University of Texas and a specialist on Latina suicide [came too], so it was a high end group of people that we were exposing students to.

**Flores:** As the '90s moved into the early 2000s, the next two people I want to put into conversation are Marc Rodriguez and Paul Gootenberg, because Paul becomes director in the early 2000s, and Marc was involved in different student groups. Paul, could you talk about the Rockefeller Grant that LACS received, and then maybe Marc can talk about student life in the early 2000s?

**Gootenberg:** Let me say first of all about LACS in general—I consider this a miracle that we were able to create this center here. Most other universities, R1s like us, they had these centers long before and it was a natural part of their interdisciplinary environment. It was such a struggle here at Stony Brook. It's only because of this coming together of people who were actively in community, and great student interest obviously, but also this very interdisciplinary dynamic faculty who really wanted to do this. There were really two clusters - one was here in History and the other was in Hispanic Languages, and we had a lot of things in common.

When I became the director – I was director for two terms - I was very ambitious. I thought, well, we could try to make this more of a national center or regional center and try different levels that hadn't been tried before. Brooke, Barbara, and I all came from universities where there was this emphasis on interdisciplinary work. I was from University of Chicago, Brooke was from Columbia, Barbara was from Yale. We wanted to connect Latin American studies, which was still a vibrant thing, with this emerging Latino interest here at Stony Brook.

So the things that changed: first of all, we got a full time staff member, and I agitated for that. Domenica Tafuro was so professional; she had come from the corporate world, and to her, this was an easy job. She was so amiable and outgoing with everybody, so this was wonderful to have a full-time staff member. The budget didn't grow that much larger, but I could work with Domenica on projects. I would talk to her about something, and a day or two later, she'd have research done and that was amazing. I wanted to raise the level of interdisciplinary research by the faculty and grad students.

The third thing I tried was to make [LACS] more of a regional center. Some of that was utopic. Relationships with Columbia, NYU, Yale, that [ended up being] a stretch. We tried some programs. We had something with the Colegio de Mexico, the president was Andrés Lira, who was a Stony Brook PhD; we had him come up here. We were trying to impress the administration that there were these important global connections here. At one time, SUNY had planned that Stony Brook would be the Latin American center of the whole system; that was why they hired so many Latin Americanists. So anyway, those were my ambitions.

[In terms of grants] I was working at the SSRC on committees. I knew the foundational world, and I thought let's do that [apply for grants]. There was some resistance from other figures in other departments who didn't want LACS to be a big success. They thought LACS shouldn't be housed in History, that it should be in another department. They were slowly expressing their displeasure all the time, but that didn't stop the faculty in that department from being enthusiastic.

So the first thing [we received] was the Tinker Grant. We didn't have a dean who would match the needed funds [\$50,000] so we had to work to match the funds [from individual departments]. The Tinker lasted about 10 years, but now they've turned their back on public institutions. But at that time, they were giving us the money and the money was being distributed to grad students doing field research....it created a much stronger interdisciplinary community, among not just History and HLL grad students but students in political science, sociology. Javier Auyero was here, [he was] one of the most brilliant figures in the field at this time. So the Tinker galvanized this grad student community, because these were competitive grants. So we became very professionalized and that was great for the grad students.

And then the Rockefeller grant, that was interesting. I came up with this idea that the Rockefeller Foundation had this Culture and Creativity program, so I honed this proposal that was about inequality in Latin America and that was before people were talking about that. Also, the US was moving in the direction of unfathomable inequalities in the '90s. So miraculously there was a site visit...we won it and it was big news. Of course, President Shirley Kenny's handlers never mentioned LACS as having won this grant. They just said "President Kenny Wins Rockefeller Grant" (laughter). In the end it was \$400,000 and it was matched in some ways. We brought in 4 scholars from across the Americas, one from Cuba, Peru, Brazil, and one who worked on Latinos in New York, Maggie Gray, and they were doing postdoctoral research here. That was about 2004.

**Flores:** Marc, what do you remember of this time?

**Rodriguez:** It was a vibrant era. I feel like coming to Stony Brook in 2000, I was an EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] student. I was from Brooklyn, I didn't have any backyard, so Stony Brook was my backyard. I learned all about Greek life, and Latino Greek life, and that was very influential. I learned about LASO and LACS. I came in with a computer science background...I did the EOP program in the summer, went through the grind, and decided to be a philosophy major. I was named after Marcus Aurelius, so I needed to find out who this guy



was (laughter). My dad says [I'm named after] Marcus Aurelius, my mom says Marco Antonio Solis (laughter).

I worked with the USG a lot. We were getting thousands of dollars, and dealing with that as an 18-year old, I was like, okay, let's throw parties! Let's do a speaker series on who was Che Guevara, pretty much teaching kids who didn't want to know anything about history. Well, history in a different way, a way that was "undergrad." I'm suffering from imposter syndrome here in front of all these PhDs! (laughter)...I remember Professor Gootenberg's tales of the wars of tea and coffee and chocolate, and I incorporated those stories when after graduation I started working for all these game companies.....Now with the [Stony Brook] career center I'm working to get students filtered into different industries, different businesses, entrepreneurship, or the corporate world, even if they are a history major, or writer, or someone in social work.

The way that Stony Brook was in the 2000s, I like to consider it a renaissance of pro-Latinism. There was a lot of events for LASO. I was LASO secretary from 2000-01 and then president from 2001-2003 and then stopped because I needed to graduate. I also joined up with the oldest existing Latino fraternity Phi Iota Alpha; they also pushed me to become a LACS minor. The work that LACS had done from the '90s to the early 2000s, there was evolution there.

I left New York in 2010 and moved to California, and then went to Japan, and then learned my family history in Mérida, Mexico. LACS [and the knowledge I gained] has taken me around the world, and it has made me the person and man I am. I also met my wife through LASO; we've been together for 17 years and have two kids. I wanted to thank everyone here. There's still work to be done and we should try to cultivate [relationships with] Latino alums to create opportunities for our students after graduation. Hispanic Languages and History are necessary to be an American, and I think what we're dealing with now at the geopolitical scale, there are things that are happening in this country that are going to make knowing these things necessary, so we might as well be at the forefront with LACS.

**Flores:** Paul Firbas and Eric Zolov, your directorships came one right after the other, and they were in the 2010s. So hearing what you've heard about the windfalls that LACS had in the decade before, what were your experiences?

**Paul Firbas:** I was director from 2011-2015, a bit longer than usual, because there was nobody really available to replace me because of grants or other service work. I came to Stony Brook in 2007, and it was a big deal to me to direct LACS. It was a great community and I really took the challenge with a lot of hope and ambitions, but it was a bit difficult. Those were the years we lost Domenica, for example. We started the hiring process for a new staff member but there were big gaps during my tenure, in which I really had no help. I was running the ship by myself and that was intense, but students were great. We had a good group of undergrads, of minors, and finding places for them to do the community internships, that helped me to start some relationships with local foundations and people around Long Island. Which was new to me; I'm not fully a Long Islander yet. I commute, so it wasn't easy for me to navigate these waters.

But it was a bit tough in terms of what the administration was telling us every week pretty much [about cuts]. Paul Gootenberg and I went a few times to the Dean's office along with Lynda. But we survived. We got the renewal for Tinker, and all departments matched the funds. At the departmental level, it was always very healthy and strong. Those years were the beginning of many things happening right now for area studies, and universities prioritizing where money should go. We opened LACS to other fields that were not properly represented before, like environmental studies.

**Flores:** How much did the administration give you for LACS?

**Firbas:** \$4,000 or \$5,000. They didn't want to say a number. Every time we wanted to do something, we had to ask them for money. My impression was that LACS - for the grad student community, for History and HLL, some in Sociology and some other programs, a community of say 50 grad students - LACS was great. I started becoming closer to History, so it was a very good experience. I wish I had done more. It was a big success to keep the show running. There was a morning that - I don't want to mention the name of the Dean at the time - he asked me, "Why do you want a minor if you're not a department? Why is a center running a minor?" That was apparently something that administration didn't want to do. So we had to educate them and say this is very structured, and we run one of the most interdisciplinary units here that you can imagine. We had Tinker recipients studying sharks in Ecuador, for example, and coming back and telling their stories.

**Zolov:** I remember when I stepped up and I was really excited to run this program. I remember this very first meeting with this new Dean with Lynda and Brooke, and he said, "I don't understand what LACS is. Why do you have LACS *and* Hispanic Languages?" And he had come in with a mandate to budget cut, and he did away with programs, and LACS was low-hanging fruit. Suddenly he reduced our budget was \$2,000. We had very little. I remember coming out of that meeting thinking, "Oh my god, what's this guy doing?" I told him to his face, "You're being penny wise and dollar foolish. You're making a big mistake to do this."

I had all these plans, and instead, I had to rally all the students, so I contacted the Statesman and reached out to LASO and said, look, they're trying to get rid of LACS. They got all up in arms, and the students from the Statesman started interviewing and asking these questions, so these stories were running. And when it filtered up to Stony Brook's President, then it became an issue. And so, I told the Dean, I wanted to work with him. I wasn't going to be a jerk about it, but this wasn't going to fly. So we worked out a compromise - \$5,000 - but he didn't want to give a budget. He was willing to give money from other places. So I got him to buy this furniture and donate the TV monitor, and then we got [donor] Amelio Sanchez to repaint the room. So the dean was willing to give me money for stuff, as long as it didn't come out of a line item that said "For LACS." We shared a half-time staff member with History. My sense was, okay, we've got to survive. The Dean was basically getting rid of LACS, but we survived, retrenched, and were reborn.

So I thought, okay, how can we do stuff on the cheap? How can we do stuff that will sustain LACS, lots of programming, but not the big stuff, no \$500 honorariums, but focus on community. We started the LACS Café, which was in the lounge, and Sarah Harrington [the half-time staff member] contacted a local empanada place and got them to donate the food as free advertising for them. The first year or two, the café was always in the lounge, and then we were busting at the seams, so we moved into the seminar room. We started “LACS at the Movies” and put the grad students in charge, to hold a free movie series with popcorn and drinks. I would stock up at Trader Joe’s on the way to campus because we didn’t have the money for catering. We also tried to revive our art gallery, which had gone into decline. When they repainted in here, we held several exhibitions. History professor Elizabeth Newman was an amateur photographer - we put her photos up. Then I got a donation basically of a big Mexican exhibit on braceros - Jonathan Mraz came to speak - and we got the presidential mini-diversity grant for that. We did a whole braceros-themed series over a year. So we had a lot of little initiatives like that. We revamped the website. It forced me to collaborate more with other departments - can you give us \$100 for this, \$150 for that. It was messy and almost not worth the effort, but it allowed us to say, “Here we are. We’re not disappearing.”

And we had Tinker at the grad level, and I remember it was coming off a 3-year renewal....They required so much data. It caused me so much stress. But we did it, and then we lost Tinker, and we were stunned. They gave it to Yale, Harvard, and Columbia, schools that clearly didn’t need the money, and took it away from us....They gave some excuse that we didn’t offer indigenous languages and Portuguese.

**Gootenberg:** There was the added controversy here of Dean Kopp trying to abolish HLL as a department. And that was an amazing comeback; that department had so much force, dynamism, and vision, and were able to fight back. A lot of people went and saw the provost about that.

**Zolov:** And LACS emerged stronger. Both of us [LACS and HLL] needed to thrive and reinvent ourselves.

**Flores:** I wanted to conclude this group conversation with Christopher, a member of the Class of 2023, to give some remarks about LACS. You’re also a Sanchez Award winner. When you left Stony Brook, what did you feel that LACS had offered you, and what kind of environment did Stony Brook create in support of first-gen students, immigrant students, all different constituencies they pride themselves on serving?

**Luna:** I came to Stony Brook as a transfer student. I’m a first-gen student and, for me, LACS was really important as my minor degree. My major was globalization studies and international relations, but Latin America has always been my region of interest. I was born in Guatemala and came to the US when I was 11, during the recession of 2008. So for me, globalization and the history of Latin America [were important to study], in conjunction with American history and the way the US has imposed itself in the region. Coming to Stony Brook and being able to take classes that dealt with those very topics—from the way that Mexican and Cuban history have

been shaped by American foreign policy and the expansion of projection of this power in a region that already had issues of its own, now to deal with the imposition of such a powerful and selfish entity—has helped better inform my opinions, as someone who came from a generation in Guatemala born out of civil war that was directly linked to US foreign policy decisions. The classes I was able to take here from Professors Gootenberg and Zolov were very enlightening, and showed me how my experience (and that of other immigrants) was shaped by US politics.

It's interesting hearing about the history of LACS and the way that it has evolved (and devolved unfortunately) because of administrative decisions that don't match up with the interests of students or really with the way that the US has evolved. There is a big demographic shift on Long Island – the way we depend on Latin American labor for putting food on our tables, or the services provided to communities, is just crazy to me....My imagination is going so many places as to what [LACS] could be, and what its vision was from the start. It's inspiring what Marc was saying about collaborating with alumni to contribute in a meaningful way towards ensuring connections are being made between current students and alumni. I think it's very important.

For me, having one of the Sanchez fellowships was a really great moment. I felt seen; I was able to tell my story in the application, and the application was a very self-reflective process. I go back and read what I wrote sometimes because it was a short glimpse into things I normally don't think about in my everyday life regarding my own lived experience in the United States. I'm very happy LACS exists at Stony Brook, and it's sad to hear how underfunded it is when there's great possibility for this place to become an incredibly important part of the academic, cultural, and overall undergrad and grad experience at the university. I hope we can move past these current financial struggles and hopefully the center will get what it deserves. The students deserve a center that is well-funded, that has the resources to bring back the type of events and speakers that Prof. Larson was talking about. The lectures we already get from our professors are incredibly insightful, but bringing back a speaker series to bring leading scholars in topics and areas and regions, would be incredible, especially because of the diversity of the student body that continues to grow. So to not be able to have that when we are a research institution, it's sad.

**Perdomo-Ayala:** I had a meeting with Provost [Lejuez] who said he wants to make Stony Brook a Hispanic Serving Institution [HSI], and i said, well, let's stop right there because before we get to that passage, there's a lot of work that needs to be done with LACS alone and Hispanic languages to create that environment, right? Because if we don't even have a staff member here, and the director's not here [on certain days], students don't have anyone to talk to....We have come to a time where we have a lot of students who are indigenous and don't feel like they can be part of LASO because they're like, we came from this very different environment than yours. But LACS should be their house. This is a place for all those individuals to feel supported.

**Flores:** Thank you all for the group conversation. (applause)