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Letter from the CLAG Executive Director

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Letter from the CLAG Executive Director

Dear Colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I share my thoughts and reflections on our organization's fiftieth anniversary, partially celebrated through the production of this special volume of the *Journal of Latin American Geography*. I have been a member of the Conference of Latin American Geographers (formerly the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, or CLAG) since the mid-1990s, so I suppose (reluctantly) that that now makes me a "senior" member. I'll keep my comments on CLAG's research history or intellectual lineages to a minimum, since that is covered in some of these pages by contributors who are far more senior than myself. But I will comment on what CLAG has meant to me personally and professionally and why I think our organization is so unique.

My earliest experiences with CLAG were through the arrival of the *Yearbook* and business meetings at the AAG conference, where, as an eager graduate student, I was able to put names to the faces of those whose research I admired and tried to emulate. Even though my first interactions with other CLAG members was, ironically, at AAG meetings, I knew then as I know today that CLAG was different. We're a group of scholars with broad regional interests, but it's more than just a regional interest that bonds CLAG members and makes our group unique.

The first aspect of CLAG that stood

out to me as a young scholar was that the organization's leadership valued our entire membership and sought to encourage the next generation of Latin Americanists to take active roles in the organization. Even as a graduate student, and later as a freshly minted Ph.D., I was never made to feel that I couldn't play a role in CLAG. Equally important was that those same senior scholars were almost always available to discuss research, publishing, and reference letters with a seemingly inconsequential graduate student (i.e., me). This culture is alive and well today with the tangible manifestations of that commitment to CLAG's future demonstrated through our support of graduate student research and travel. There is no other large or small geographical organization that provides the level of support for graduate students that CLAG does. The amount of support has grown tremendously since I was a graduate student, which in turn demonstrates the success of our outstanding journal, from which much of our revenue is generated. And as grant money in all forms is seemingly sliced ever thinner, our support of graduate students becomes even more vital. Not simply as a means to sow the seeds of future CLAG participation and leadership, but as a way to support important fieldwork of young scholars in a time when Latin American research and associated voices from the field are more important than ever given the political climate in which we live.

In addition to supporting young schol-

ars in various forms, CLAG remains a vital community. As scholars, much of our work is solitary and we are scattered around the globe in departments where we are frequently the lone Latin Americanist. Even when involved in collaborative projects, we often work alone the majority of the time. Thus events such as our business meetings, sponsored speakers, social events, and CLAG conferences are opportunities to learn about others' research and forge friendships and collaborative partnerships that can last for decades. I remain in close contact with many of my then-fellow graduate students and have witnessed their career successes over the past two decades. Similarly, I remain in contact with many of those senior scholars whose work I admired

decades ago. As young scholars, we are understandably focused on our individual work and career, but as I have traveled the ranks from assistant to full professor, I have increasingly valued the larger, scholarly community that we are part of. So as we move forward into the next half century of CLAG, let's take pride in the success of our organization and the meaningful relationships created along the way. Let's make the next fifty years even better with a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to a region that bonds us all.

Saludos,
Michael Steinberg, PhD
University of Alabama