

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

Department of Geography
Spring Semester 2025

GEOGRAPHY OF LATIN AMERICA

GEOG 516 – 001

Course Syllabus

Instructor: Ian S. Ward

Office: Exploratory Hall, Room 2222

Office Hours: Monday, 3:00 – 4:00pm, or by
appointment on BB Collaborate

Class Location: Nguyen Engineering Hall
Room 1109

Meeting Time: 4:30-7:10pm, Mondays

Email: iward@gmu.edu

Course Overview:

South of the U.S. border—spanning nearly 7,000 miles from Tijuana, Mexico to Ushuaia, Argentina—lies one of the great cultural realms of the world. Long seen as a land of mystery and intrigue, of great opportunity and vast economic potential, Latin America continues to draw the attention of scholars and travelers alike. A study of its physical geography reveals a portfolio of ecosystems that have created conditions for unprecedented biodiversity. Home to the largest contiguous rain forest and largest wetland in the world, the realm not only boasts arguably the wettest location on earth, but also the driest. Its massive rivers and mountain ranges rival the size and scope of the largest found anywhere in the world. The wide-ranging landscapes also yield enormous energy and mineral resources that, in some cases, are just beginning to be exploited for their economic value. From tiny island nations, to massive Brazil, the countries of the realm are composed of a mosaic of ethnicities that span the world. Mixed with rich indigenous cultures, the contributions brought by these relative newcomers have created a highly dynamic and energized society. Unfortunately, a legacy of colonialism, corrupt political dynasties, environmental degradation, education neglect, social stratification, crime, and illegal narcotics have created historical hardships that have been difficult for many nations here to overcome. Yet despite the many serious challenges that persist today, optimistic changes in social attitudes and governmental policy can be seen spreading across much of Latin America, making this one of the most fascinating times to better understand this area of the world. Using a holistic approach, this class aims to provide students a new frame of reference for analyzing and understanding the rich and complex geography of the Latin American realm.

Course Objectives: Based upon the readings, lecture notes, and independent study, students will be able to:

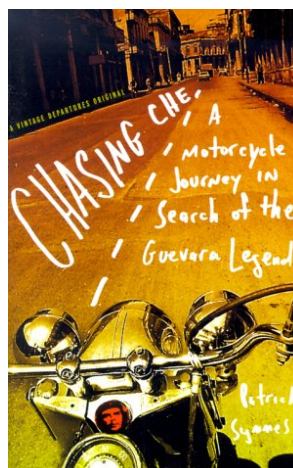
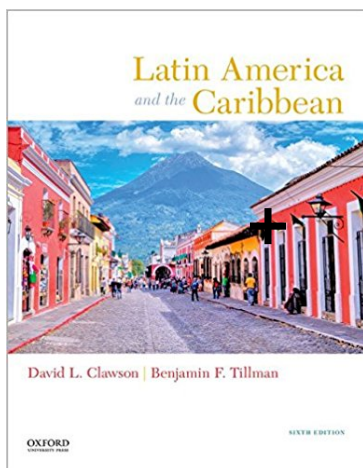
- 1) define the areas that comprise Latin America;
- 2) describe the realm in terms of physical characteristics such as climate or landforms;
- 3) describe the realm in terms of cultural characteristics such as language or religion;
- 4) explain specific geographic concepts such as core & periphery and culture hearths;
- 5) and demonstrate how these concepts help explain regional differences and spatial patterns of distribution.

Student Requirements:

As a graduate level course, students are expected to read and write critically as well as conduct significant research outside the classroom. Students are responsible for all assigned reading and lecture material, as well as regular access to GMU's Blackboard system. An evaluation of the student's performance in the class will be based on exams, written assignments, oral presentations, and class participation (*see Grading Scheme and Policy for details*).

Required Readings:

- (1) Clawson, David L., [*Latin America & the Caribbean*](#), 6th edition, Oxford University Press.
- (2) Symmes, Patrick, [*Chasing Che – A Motorcycle Journey in Search of the Legend of Che*](#), Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.



Recommended:

- It is strongly recommended that students consider purchasing an atlas of their choice, preferably one with good coverage of Central and South America. A good choice is the *Goode's World Atlas, 23rd edition*, but there are certainly others. Shop around and explore what is available. Those from Nystrom, Hammond, National Geographic, and Rand McNally are also quite good.

Student Working Groups:

The class will be divided into 6 groups named after notable animals found in particular areas of Latin America: **Rhea**, **Boto**, **Coatí**, **Arapaima**, **Guanaco**, and **Tucán**. Assignments to groups will be made during the second week of class. The purpose of this is only for structuring journal presentations and organizing class discussions / activities. There will be no required projects where individuals within groups will collectively earn the same grade. Only individual work will be evaluated in this class. It is anticipated that each group will have either 2 or 3 people.

Examinations and Examination Policies:

- 1) Two examinations (one Midterm and one comprehensive Final) will be administered during the semester (*see attached schedule for dates*). The combined scores of these two exams will account for 35% of the overall grade (Midterm = 25%; Final 10%).
- 2) **Makeup exams are generally not offered** except under the most extraordinary circumstances. Make-up arrangements must be made in writing in advance of the exam. A physician must document medical absences; this is available for all students through the University Health Clinic. Please make sure that you plan ahead to provide extra time to arrive early on exam days.
- 3) Exams begin and end as indicated in the class schedule: no additional time for late arrivals.
- 4) The Midterm Exam will be a combination of multiple choice, short answer questions, and one essay. The Final Exam will be one essay question.
- 5) No books or notes of any kind (hardcopy or electronic) may be used during any examination in this class. **Cell phones / laptops / tablets must be turned OFF at all times.**
- 6) Test and other grades can easily be found on Blackboard. Please schedule to meet with me during office hours if you would like to discuss any of the material that was covered on the exams.

Academic Integrity:

Academic integrity is essential and each individual is expected to do his or her own work; violations of the University Honor Code will not be tolerated and will result in course failure. A description of the University Honor Code is available for review in the University Catalog and on our class Blackboard page.

Classroom Expectations:

- 1) LAPTOPS and TABLETS are allowed to be used by students during lectures. However, if their use is deemed to be a distraction to the user, the instructor, or any other students in the class, the user will be asked by the instructor to turn off their device and take hand-written notes.
- 2) CELL PHONES should be SILENCED before class begins.
- 3) NO TEXTING or IM'ing, please. Not only is your full and undivided attention requested, but your active participation in class discussion is highly encouraged.
- 4) NO HEADPHONES (of any kind) should be worn in the classroom during lectures or exams.
- 5) NO PHOTOGRAPHY. Photography is not permitted in the classroom, regardless of the reason.
- 6) AUDIO RECORDINGS may only be made with instructor authorization.
- 7) BE ON TIME - Students are expected to be on time for class. Should circumstances arise that make you late, do not disrupt the class as you enter; take the first aisle seat that is available and do not walk across the room. Attendance and punctuality will be considered in your final grade.
- 8) KEEP THE ROOM CLEAN. If you pack it in, pack it out; leave your seat better than you found it.
- 9) GET INVOLVED – Whether or not you've had personal experiences in Latin America, you will undoubtedly have questions, comments, and maybe some personal experiences that you'll want to share during the semester. We want to hear from you. I consider student engagement in the classroom a critical part of the learning process.

Blackboard:

This course will utilize Blackboard for posting class information and course material. Please refer to it periodically (once every few days) for updates and new postings. Our page can be accessed using the URL: <https://mymasonportal.gmu.edu/>. Final grades will be posted on Patriot Web.

Note Taking:

- Lectures will be accompanied by the use of electronic slides, maps, and photographs. You are not required—nor is it necessary—to copy the contents of these slides word-for-word, but it is strongly recommended that you take note of the details discussed on them. Students may attend office hours to review and discuss any class material, including having the chance to see ALL of the slides presented in class. I strongly encourage you to stop by and meet with me especially if you've missed a class or find that you are having a little difficulty with any element(s) of the class.
- If at any point during the lecture you feel that I am changing slides too fast, please let me know and I will slow down.

Chapter Analysis:

The class will be reading the first chapter of the book *Brave Companions: Portraits in History*, by David McCullough. This is a very short piece entitled "Journey to the Top of the World" (pp. 3-19) and focuses on the famous explorer and bio-geographer **Alexander von Humboldt**. The chapter will be available to you on Blackboard under *Reserved Reading*. The book, which is a collection of well-written short stories by McCullough, is also available at several sites online and in most major bookstores.

Chapter Analysis - Expectations:

- 1) The format for the journal will be 2 to 3 pages, double-spaced with one-inch margins and using a 10 or 12 pitch font.

- 2) For the basis of your analysis, you should address the following:
 - (a) Describe some of Humboldt's notable achievements.
 - (b) What areas of Latin America did he explore?
 - (c) How did Humboldt change the way outsiders looked at Latin America in the 19th century?
- 3) Use specific examples from the chapter to support your arguments.
- 4) Though the core of your paper should center on McCullough's chapter, you may use additional outside sources to enhance your conclusions. Cite these additional sources in your paper if you decide to use any.
- 5) Please save your personal opinions for the in-class discussion on February 10th.

Map Exercise:

Students will be required to participate and complete an in-class map exercise on February 27th during the regularly scheduled class time (4:30-7:10PM). The exercise will take place in Exploratory Hall (*2nd floor in front of the Department of Geography and Geoinformation Science*) and will provide students with an opportunity to examine a variety of cartographic work covering Latin America. A series of activities and questions will serve as a guide through the exercise. Students will work in their 'animal groups', but will submit their own exercise packets for individual grading. Students should bring a couple of pencils, pens, and a ruler to the exercise. Please note that due to the logistical difficulties in preparing an event of this size, make-up opportunities will not be available.

Map Quiz:

A map quiz will be administered that is designed to provide an evaluation of each student's understanding of the locations of countries, cities, and physical features. A complete list of everything that may be asked on the quiz will be made available to students no later than Week 2. Copies of the maps that will be used in the quiz will also be made available on Blackboard. It is strongly suggested that these be printed and used in preparing for the quiz.

Journal Presentation:

Each student will be required to prepare a short in-class oral presentation addressing one news article related to the geography of Latin America published within 1 to 2 weeks of the day of the presentation. No trivial topics please (ie: "Javier Milei teaches Trump How To Dance Tango", or "Beachgoers Find a Blue Lobster in Rio de Janeiro"). **The article you choose must have real geographic relevance.** Each presentation will represent an individual's own work on analyzing the story – not that of the collective group. However, group members must coordinate so as not to overlap topics, or re-cover topics presented from prior weeks. Sources may be in English, Spanish or Portuguese, but class presentations must be in English. Acceptable sources may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- (a) Journal of Latin American Studies
- (b) Foreign Policy - (This magazine will have "FP" on cover)
- (c) Current History
- (d) The Economist
- (e) Latin American Weekly Report
- (f) Most major news outlets (avoid highly abbreviated articles)

Presentations must align with the schedule of your group – *see class schedule*. You will not be allowed to change due dates.

Using identical topics from current or previous weeks will result in a grade reduction. Keep notes on the topics that other students present from week to week.

Submitting your topic for instructor's approval:

- 1) Send an email to your group and instructor stating your choice of an article. Emails should include the author(s), name of article, name of the journal or news publication, date of the article, page numbers (if applicable), and website address (URL link). **This should be sent out no later than the Thursday before your group presents.** Be sure to include the name of your group in the subject heading.
- 2) Once you have the instructor's approval, you may begin preparing your presentation for the coming Monday.

Oral Presentation Expectations:

- 3) The first 20 to 30 minutes of class will begin with student presentations. Each student's presentation should be very brief (5 minutes max, with 5 to 10 minutes afterwards of questions, answers, and discussion). * Presenters should state their name, name of the article, source, and deliver a brief overview of the topic point-by-point emphasizing the geographic relevance of the story.
- 4) Begin your presentation by (1) stating your name, (2) the name of the article, and (3) the name of the journal or news publication.
- 5) The goal is to (1) deliver a basic overview of the article (summary), (2) describe its geographical / spatial importance, and (3) provide broader context by offering analysis on its geographic implications in the region and realm. DO NOT read the journal article to the class. Rather—if necessary—use only small index cards with a few notes when presenting.
- 6) Your personal opinions on the topic should not be a component of your presentation, but may be offered during the Q&A session.
- 7) Unless otherwise noted, all group presentations will be conducted at the beginning of class.

Project (Paper and Presentation):

Overview: This course focuses on a variety of geographical issues stretching across the realms of Middle and South America. You will be asked to take a close look at one of these topics, or perhaps another of your choosing related to the geography of Latin America. Working individually, each student will prepare an overview and analysis of the issue and present their findings in a research paper and an in-class presentation. **Participants must submit their proposal for a research topic in writing for approval by February 24th, preferably earlier. Remember, the focus must be geographical and have a clear spatial component to it.** Topics for the paper may be found in the following areas:

Political / Boundary disputes	Colonialism
Environmental degradation	Bio-geography
Economic issues / trends	Urbanization
Exploitation of Natural Resources	Transportation
Population trends	Agriculture / Fishing
Climate and Weather	Culture
Narcotics / War on Drugs	Tourism
Geoarchaeology	Energy

The Paper: The format of the paper will be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, and a 10 or 12 pitch font. The length of the paper will not exceed 12 pages, not counting maps, illustrations, end-notes, and bibliography. Remember that a few well-written pages are much more effective than reams of unnecessary filler. A separate cover page (with the paper title, your name, student ID number, course title and number) and bibliography will not count against the page total. References will be cited using an APA format. All papers are expected to contain at least one relevant map to support the text. Papers will be submitted using the following approximate format using subheadings to delineate the sections:

- 1) **Title Page**
- 2) **Table of Contents**
- 3) **A two to three page Overview.**
- 4) **A seven to eight page Analysis.**
- 5) **A two page Conclusion** (to include 'future trends' or predictions)
- 6) **Bibliography**
- 7) **Figures and Tables**

This is an exercise in reasoned analysis, not advocacy. Your purpose is not to argue one side or the other, rather you are expected to provide a careful and dispassionate analysis of a geographic topic. Do not let preconceived ideas or emotions cloud your judgment.

The Presentation: Student presentations will occur on April 21st. This portion of the assignment will account for approximately 20% (70 points) of the overall grade of the project. Each presenter will be given approximately 20 to 30 minutes maximum to discuss their research. Each presenter must also prepare a one-page handout for distribution to the class, which is to include highlights and important information from your research. Test questions for undergraduate students will be drawn from these summaries.

Overall Evaluation: The projects will be graded on the following grounds.

- **Mechanics** - including following the format, spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- **Organization and Logic** - including cohesive, logical development of your topic.
- **Intellectual Rigor** - including support for your statements, no vague generalities.
- **Class Presentation** – including effectiveness, impact, content, and style of both the oral presentation and the one-page handout distributed to classmates.

Late Policy on Written Assignments:

- (a) **Chapter Analysis** – a maximum of a one-week extension with a minimum of a 20% deduction beginning at the in-class time of collection on the day it is due.
- (b) **Project** – a maximum of a two week extension with a minimum of a 10% deduction each week it is late beginning at the end of class the day it is due. No extension will be provided for the in-class presentation component.

To receive the highest credit possible, assignments must be turned in on-time (at the beginning of class the day it is due). It is best to begin work on assignments as soon as possible to allow yourself plenty of time to prepare a neat and thoughtful product.

Course Material:

All course material posted to Blackboard is private to this class and may NOT be distributed to anyone outside of this course. In addition, as stated by Federal law, any materials that identify specific students (via their name, voice, or image) must NOT be shared with anyone not enrolled in this class.

- Videorecordings — whether made by instructors or students — of class meetings that include audio, visual, or textual information from other students are private and must not be shared outside the class
- Live video conference meetings on Blackboard Collaborate that include audio, textual, or visual information from other students must be viewed privately and not shared with others in your household or recorded and shared outside the class.
- Instructional videos and slides are copyrighted and not to be shared publicly or online; they are the property of the instructor.

Email and Student Privacy

Students must use their MasonLive (GMU) email account to communicate with the instructor, and to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. See <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information. All email communication will be conducted using professional email etiquette, including appropriate salutations, a clear message, and a signature (name of sender).

Disability Accommodations:

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474, <http://ods.gmu.edu>. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS.

Graduate / Undergraduate Requirement Comparison:

Requirement	GG5 516	GG5 316
Midterm Exam	YES	YES
Final Exam	YES (Essay)	YES (short answer)
Semester Project (Term Paper)	YES	NO
Book Review (Paper and Discussion)	Participation in Class Discussion only	YES
Journal	YES	YES
Chapter Analysis	YES	YES
In-class Map Exercise	YES	YES
Map Quiz	YES	YES

Privacy:

Students must use their MasonLive email account to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. See <http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information.

Disability Accommodations:

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474, <http://ods.gmu.edu>. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the ODS.

Grading Scheme and Policy:

Your combined score of the following will determine your grade in this course:

Semester Project	————→	35%	=	350 points
Midterm Exam	————→	25%	=	250 points
Final Exam	————→	10%	=	100 points
Map Quiz	————→	10%	=	100 points
Journal Presentation	————→	5%	=	50 points
Map Exercise	————→	5%	=	50 points
Chapter Analysis	————→	5%	=	50 points
Che Book Discussion	————→	5%	=	50 points
			=	<hr/> 1,000 points

Point Translation:

920 - 1000	=	A	780 - 799	=	C+
900 - 919	=	A-	700 - 779	=	C
880 - 899	=	B+	600 - 699	=	D
820 - 879	=	B	0 - 599	=	F
800 - 819	=	B-			

Key Dates:

1 / 27	Class begins	3 / 10	No Class – Spring Break
1 / 28	Last day to add course * must be enrolled for a grade!	3 / 17	MAP QUIZ
2 / 4	Last day to drop with no tuition liability	3 / 31	MIDTERM EXAM
2 / 10	CHAPTER ANALYSIS DUE	4 / 21	PROJECT PRESENTATION
2 / 12 – 2 / 25	Unrestricted Withdrawal Period	4 / 28	In-class DISCUSSION on “Chasing Che”
3 / 3	MAP EXERCISE	5 / 5	SEMESTER PROJECT DUE
2 / 24	LAST DAY TO SUBMIT PAPER TOPIC	5 / 5	Last day of class
		5 / 12	FINAL EXAM 4:30 – 7:15PM

Tentative Class Schedule

(as of 27 January 2025)

WEEK	DATE	TOPIC	READINGS & GROUPS
1	1 / 27	INTRODUCTION Discussion of the class / Why Geography? Perceptions of Latin America The Geography of Latinos in the U.S.	Chapter 1
2	2 / 3	DEFINING REGIONAL ANALYSIS The Elements of National Power PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY Landform Regions of South America	Chapters 2 / 3 See reserve readings from the Blackboard
3	2 / 10	Chapter Analysis Due PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY Landform Regions of South America	Chapters 3 See reserve readings from the Blackboard
4	2 / 17	PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY Landform Regions of Middle America Weather & Climate	Chapter 3 / 4
5	2 / 24	PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY Natural Hazards CULTURAL PATTERNS Ancient Civilizations	Chapter 5 Boto
6	3 / 3	In-Class Map Exercise <i>Meet in the common area in Exploratory Hall, 2nd floor</i>	Chapter 6
7	3 / 10	NO CLASS (Spring Break)	
8	3 / 17	MAP QUIZ CULTURAL PATTERNS The "Age of Reconnaissance" Iberian Heritage, Conquest, Institutions	Chapter 7
9	3 / 24	CULTURAL PATTERNS The Columbian Exchange Land Claims, Treaties, & Policies Revolution & Independence	Chapter 8 Coatí

Tentative Class Schedule

(as of 27 January 2025)

WEEK	DATE	TOPIC	READINGS & GROUPS
10	3 / 31	MIDTERM EXAM	STUDY!
		CULTURAL PATTERNS Latin America as a Cultural Region	
11	4 / 7	REGIONAL ANALYSIS Mexico	Chapters 8 / 11
			Arapaima
12	4 / 14	REGIONAL ANALYSIS Central America & the Greater Antilles	Chapters 11
			Guanaco
13	4 / 21	REGIONAL ANALYSIS Northern South America Andean South America	Catch up on readings
		Graduate Project Presentation	
14	4 / 28	<i>* IN-CLASS Discussion on "Chasing Che"</i>	Chapter 12
		REGIONAL ANALYSIS Brazil & the Southern Cone	
15	5 / 5	Semester Project Due	Chapter 13
		REGIONAL ANALYSIS The Southern Cone	Tucán
16	5 / 12	FINAL EXAM	STUDY! Exam Time: (4:30pm to 7:15pm)