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# EDITOR'S FOREWORD

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## EXPEDITING MANUSCRIPT REVIEWS AND *LARR* ACCEPTANCE RATES

This is the second annual report to provide comparative data about *LARR* manuscript submission and acceptance rates, the average time taken in review, and the disciplinary areas and countries represented in research submissions during the calendar year 2003 (see *LARR* 38, no. 2, for the previous year's report). In this foreword I also report on how that distribution of submissions actually translates into published articles and research notes, in this case drawing upon two years of published material, 2003 and 2004 (i.e., six issues including the present one). I also provide additional data about books received and review essays solicited, as a supplement to Associate Editor Henry Dietz's foreword in the previous issue (vol. 39, no.2).

### MANUSCRIPT REVIEW AND PUBLICATION TIME

*LARR* remains firmly committed to ensuring that all work submitted is reviewed as constructively as possible and that reviews be completed in a timely manner. We are also determined to avoid a significant backlog or queue of papers that would further delay publication of an accepted manuscript. The in-press time thereafter is straightforward, providing few opportunities for time savings: Once a manuscript is accepted, copyediting, communicating with authors on edits, reviewing proofs, scheduling production and distribution, and so on require a minimum of nine months.

Since *LARR* transferred to the University of Texas at Austin in 2002, the editors have made it a high priority to notify authors about decisions on their manuscripts expeditiously. In order to achieve this, papers undergo an initial internal review by an expert in the field. When it

is decided not to proceed with an external review of the manuscript, the paper is rejected at that stage. Only slightly less than half of all manuscripts received actually go out for external review, and this preliminary decision reflects a good-faith judgment by the editor about the paper's appropriateness for *LARR*, the anticipated level of interest in the subject matter for a multi- and inter-disciplinary audience, the quality of the reported research, and a *prima facie* assessment that it has at least a reasonable chance of receiving a positive reading by three or four anonymous reviewers. At this stage the benefit of the doubt always goes to the author, our maxim being: "if in doubt, send it out." Although we appreciate that a quick rejection is both disappointing and frustrating for authors, since little detailed feedback is offered, we believe that the process—a longstanding *LARR* tradition—is defensible *so long as it is expeditious*. Readers should know that in 2003 the average turnaround for rejections at this stage was *thirteen days*—well inside the one-month target that we set ourselves when *LARR* moved to the University of Texas at Austin.

In 2003, 47 percent of submissions went out for full external review by three referees—"double blinded" of course (we strive to ensure that neither reviewers nor authors know each other's identity)—and the average time taken was *eighty-seven days* (i.e., slightly less than three months) from first receipt of the manuscript to a decision letter being sent to the author. Outside of the medical and biological sciences, a turnaround time of less than three months is considered exceptionally fast. And while reviewers are asked to return their reports within one month, the process is often considerably longer given the time it takes to contact potential reviewers, send them the manuscript, and so on. Prospective authors can help at this stage by ensuring that, when requested to do so, they send *LARR* the electronic copy of their paper, properly "blinded" (see "Submission Information" at <http://larr.lanic.utexas.edu>). Unfortunately, not all reviewers are able to get back to us inside one month, and we rarely make a decision until we have at least three reports in hand, copies of which are sent to the author. *LARR* also sends reviewers a copy of the decision letter, together with copies of the individual reviewers' evaluations (with all identifying remarks removed). The aim is to maximize feedback to authors and reviewers alike.

A decision on manuscripts that have been revised and resubmitted is usually made inside four weeks, since the process involves two reviewers (one original and one newly selected) who are asked primarily to assess whether the author has satisfactorily addressed the original reviewers' comments.

Thus, I am satisfied that *LARR* is doing its utmost to create a review process that is both timely and efficient, and the editors are deeply grateful to all reviewers who have supported this effort. By increasing the

electronic processing of manuscripts, we have been able to reduce the turnaround time substantially. Finally, in an effort to sustain our commitment to a timely reviewing process, as well as to make it more transparent, from this issue forward, each published article will carry a calendar indication of the timeline for review and production.

#### PATTERN OF MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSIONS AND ACCEPTANCE RATES, 2003

It is the practice of the lead editor to report to readers on the patterns of submissions in the preceding twelve months. The following data refer to manuscripts submitted as full articles or as Research Notes.

*LARR* received 33 percent more manuscripts in 2003 than in the first year of operation at the University of Texas at Austin (100 cf. 75). This represents an encouraging "spike" in submission rates over recent years, (the all-time high was 118 in the mid-1990s, as reported by Gil Merx (*LARR* 30, no. 3, 5).

The data displayed in the table are suggestive of some modest but perceptible disciplinary shifts in submissions over the past year, although we will need to track and monitor these further before making any definitive observations about changing trends. As in previous years, political science (including government) continues to stand out with 40 percent of all submissions, and although economics as a stand-alone category continues to show very few submissions, political economy (spanning as it often does both economics and politics) is important with 7 percent of submissions. History submissions are down (11 percent compared with 17 percent in the previous year), although history continues to fare quite strongly in terms of published papers (21 percent of all papers). The arts and humanities (including cultural studies) together with literature and language, made up 10 percent of all submissions, compared with 14 percent in 2002, but the conversion rate into published papers is somewhat lower—about 8 percent. Sociology has shown an increase from 9 to 16 percent, but here, too, the conversion rate to published papers is lower, at around 8 percent.

By far the largest number of submissions come from scholars resident in the United States, although in a number of cases this includes Latin American scholars who are U.S. residents or visiting scholars. But in 2003 only 11 percent of all submissions came from scholars actually living in Latin America, notwithstanding *LARR*'s commitment to publish in Spanish and Portuguese.

In terms of the pattern of submissions by country content focus, Brazil (22 percent) and Mexico (15 percent) remain prevalent, as do papers with a general Latin American or comparative multiple-country focus (17 percent). The more discrete breakdown of data for country of focus adopted since 2003 allows us to undertake a greater disaggregation of

Table 1 Manuscript Submissions and Publication by Discipline and by Country  
Content Focus, 2002 and 2003

	Submissions in 2002	Submissions in 2003	Papers Published, vols. 38–39
<i>Principal Disciplinary Area</i>			
Agriculture	1%	1%	2.6%
Archaeology / Anthropology	3%	7%	5.3%
Architecture, Planning Urban Design	3%	1%	2.6%
Culture, Fine Arts, Film and Media Studies	9%	5%	2.6%
Economics	3%	2%	5.3%
Education	1%	1%	
Gender Issues/Women's Studies	3%	2%	2.6%
Geography/Environmental Health	3%	1%	5.3%
History	17%	11%	21.1%
Library and Bibliographic Resources	1%	1%	
International Relations			
Law			
Literature/Language	5%	5%	5.3%
Political Economy	12%	7%	5.3%
Political Science	27%	40%	31.6%
Religion	3%		2.6%
Sociology	9%	16%	7.9%
Number of Manuscripts	75	100	39
<i>Country Focus of Content</i>			
Argentina	9%	11%	13%
Brazil	15%	22%	15%
Central America		13%	5%
Chile		12%	3%
Latin America (general or comparative)	24%	17%	23%
Mexico	13%	15%	13%
Peru		5%	5%
Others	39%*	5%	23%
<i>Region of Origin (by Place of Residence) of Papers Submitted</i>			
USA/Canada	57 (76%)	82 (82%)	35 (90%)
Latin America (including Mexico & Caribbean )	12 (16%)	11 ( 11%)	2 (5%)
Others (mostly Europe)	6 (8%)	7 (7%)	2 (5%)
Totals	75	100	39

\* The high number of "Others" is because we lacked information on some manuscripts inherited from the University of New Mexico Press.

statistics. Central American countries are quite well represented (13 percent), and Chile and Argentina also figure prominently, with Peru as the only other country to feature as the country of focus in the minimum threshold of five submissions.

The reputation of a journal is an important consideration, not least in the United States where the venue for publication is a key criterion for academic appointments, promotions, tenure review, and so on. Due to the high-quality tradition established by past editors, *LARR* is deservedly considered to be a "top-tier" journal. For good or ill, one criterion that universities frequently use to measure the status of a journal is the volume of submissions and the ratio of acceptance or rejection rates. Generally, the more stringent the journal, the higher the esteem in which it is held, and the editorial office of *LARR* receives frequent enquiries about such matters. The data are as follows: of the 100 articles submitted for consideration in 2003, fifty-three were rejected at the internal review stage; forty-seven went out for external review, after which just over half were also rejected; and a further twelve (i.e., 24 percent) were also rejected but with an encouragement to revise and resubmit. (Of those subsequently resubmitted, almost 80 percent were accepted, although sometimes after a second round of revisions.) Thus, in 2003 the overall rejection rate of manuscripts at *LARR*, combining internal and external review, was 84 percent. And while an overall 15–16 percent acceptance rate for manuscripts is not quite as fierce as the single-digit level of some of the leading disciplinary journals, *LARR* nevertheless remains one of the tougher journals in which to get one's article accepted.

#### BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

In the previous issue Associate Editor Henry Dietz provided an overview of our policy of book review essays. In that foreword he described how we are proposing to reduce the substantial backlog of unpublished book review essays and to avoid reviewing books published more than three years ago. To achieve this, one strategy has been to increase slightly the number of published pages dedicated to the Review Essays section over two issues, of which this current issue is the second. Book review essays are edited internally and do not go out for external review. Once received, they can usually be published within the nine-month window outlined above, assuming that major revisions are not required.

*LARR* is pleased to receive such a large number of books for review each year. As readers are aware, our policy is to invite essayists to review books that have been clustered thematically. Unlike most other journals, *LARR* does not do individual book reviews, and readers continue to express the view that review essays are extremely useful (especially in their teaching), given that several books are discussed in an

authoritative way by an expert framing the discussion from his or her own research perspective. However, clustering books by theme and eliciting a commitment from an essayist is both time consuming and exacting. Not all books can be successfully clustered or assigned to an essayist; and even those that are sometimes fall by the wayside. In 2003 *LARR* received 465 books—up almost 50 percent over the previous year—and some seventy-two thematic clusters were created, of which almost sixty were placed with essayists. Such a through-flow continues to ensure a healthy number of review essays for inclusion in *LARR*, but our policy is to keep the proportion of pages dedicated to Review Essays at around 40–45 percent of the total issue.

Finally let me urge individual subscribers who have not already done so to make use of *LARR-On-Line* at no additional cost. We hope that the opportunity to access *LARR* on the website is particularly useful for Latin American individual subscribers whose institutions can rarely afford the cost of a subscription to electronic databases such as JSTOR and Project MUSE. *LARR-On-Line* allows users to do keyword and author searches on back issues, and to download articles for research and teaching purposes. For further information, please visit our website.

In 2003 *LARR*'s home page design and the cover art of volume 39 have featured cartographic illustrations. Volume 40 (2005) will introduce a new banner color, and will feature Latin American flora as its principal theme, again drawing upon materials from the University of Texas at Austin's Benson Latin American Library Collection. Enjoy!

Peter M. Ward,  
Executive Editor