

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: José María Sanz Martínez, Rector of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and member of the Talloires Network Steering Committee

by Lorlene Hoyt and John Pollock



September signals the 13th installment of our Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement series. This issue features José María Sanz Martínez, the Rector of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and a member of the Talloires Network Steering Committee.

When asked to describe his most important value, Professor Sanz answered “igualdad de oportunidades” (equal opportunities). His commitment to equal opportunities stems from his own background. He was born in Madrid to a humble family that was deeply committed to providing their son with a good education and opportunities. Due to the influence of a teacher who inspired his interest in math and physics, Sanz chose to study Physics at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. UAM was a new university at the time, founded as a research university. “As a student, it was a wonderful time. The university was trying to introduce new techniques, and I developed friendships with many of my classmates and professors.” After earning his PhD in Material Science from the University of Stuttgart in Germany, Sanz came back to UAM as a lecturer and researcher. He joined the management of UAM as the Vice Rector in 2002 and Rector in 2009.

Professor Sanz first became aware of university civic engagement when he became Vice Rector for Research at UAM. Universities in Spain had traditionally avoided addressing social problems, and only in late 1990s did they become more engaged. The previous rector of UAM launched the Office for Solidarity and Cooperation in 2002, and the office gradually became a key institution at the university. The leadership displayed by his predecessor in making UAM a more engaged campus motivated Sanz to also play an active role in social responsibility work as Rector of UAM.

One of the most important goals of the office for Solidarity and Cooperation “was to make students and professors aware of social responsibility.” One of the early programs to achieve this goal was a student volunteer program to assist students with disabilities. UAM also collaborated with the United Nations Volunteer (UNV) Program to launch the Spanish University Volunteer Network, which sends volunteers from 27 Spanish universities to work toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals in developing countries. Professor Sanz credits the Founding Director of the Office for Solidarity and Cooperation, Silvia Arias Careaga, with the success of these programs. “This was new. This way of involving students was difficult in the beginning, and it took time to make it work. But Silvia did beautiful work, and the Volunteers Program is now a key point of the university.”

Sanz freely admits that UAM’s progress on social responsibility has not come without challenges or setbacks. “We expected that things would go faster and that we would involve

people more rapidly.” In particular, it is difficult to get professors involved in social responsibility because they are under pressure with their research and teaching duties, and they are often not conscious of social responsibility. It tends to be much easier to get students interested in these issues. When asked if UAM would consider making social responsibility activities mandatory for students, he dismissed this idea: “You don’t have to push students to get involved, but encourage them to do so, by proposing interesting projects and by supporting the ones students suggest.”

When asked about his vision for the future of the global movement of engaged universities, Professor Sanz emphasized connecting university stakeholders around the world. “Networking is one main objective, and the Talloires Network is in a position to put people in contact with each other.” By connecting institutions around the world, the Talloires Network can facilitate the sharing of knowledge and raise the visibility of university civic engagement.

Professor Sanz also argued that “Research should be the focus for the next ten years, looking at civic engagement and social responsibility. Developing and sharing knowledge, research and ideas is the only way to move these ideas forward.” This is particularly challenging because different countries and regions have diverse ideas about civic engagement and social responsibility. Professor Sanz noted, “People in South America speak the same language as me, but we are talking about different things because our culture and traditions are different.” The language and terminology about civic engagement often differs from country to country. Therefore, the Talloires Network could be in a position “to help define concepts of civic engagement and social responsibility in different contexts around the world” and develop common definitions and good practices.

José María Sanz Martínez was elected Rector of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in July 2009 and was re-elected in April 2013. He has been a member of the university’s governing body since 2002 and has extensive experience in university management. As a scientist and experienced researcher, he is a member of several national and international steering and review committees and panels, and since 2001 he has been the European Editor of *Surface and Interface Analysis*. An expert in materials science as well as in electron spectroscopies for surface and interface analysis, he has published more than 130 papers in a wide range of international peer-reviewed journals and has been responsible of numerous research projects.