

## Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Rafael Velasco, Rector of the Universidad Católica de Córdoba

by Lorlene Hoyt



April signals the tenth installment of our Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement series. This issue features Rafael Velasco, Rector of the Universidad Católica de Córdoba and member of the Talloires Network Steering Committee.

My interview with Rector Velasco took place in the morning on Good Friday, also known as Holy Friday, a religious holiday commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. A minute or two into our conversation, I learned that Rector Velasco knows the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now leader of the Roman Catholic Church. And the Rector confirmed what I had heard from Maria Nieves Tapia (Director for the Latin American Center for Service-learning) earlier this month: Archbishop Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, is an advocate of university civic engagement. Case in point, when then Archbishop Bergoglio appointed the current President of the Catholic University of Argentina, he urged him to reorient the university's resources toward the nearby slums.

Rector Velasco has headed Universidad Católica de Córdoba (UCC), located in his hometown, since 2005. Before assuming this post, he was Rector of the Colegio del Salvador (1999-2003). Under his leadership, UCC adopted an approach called "University Social Responsibility," which includes a wide array of social responsibility projects and programs that permeate the university's research and teaching activities. Today, there are 44 such initiatives up-and-running, with 900 students participating each year. The university supports social responsibility and learning in five distinct areas: human rights and poverty; sustainability and development; health and disease prevention; public policy; and applied knowledge.

When I prompted Rector Velasco to paint a portrait of an UCC initiative, he replied with enthusiasm, "Architecture students learn about architecture in the slums by helping people build houses. They provide professional assistance and learn about the reality of people living in poverty." He also described an ongoing research program in a town adjacent to UCC, Nuestro Hogar III (Our Home III), where the local government located a dump. UCC "stood with the people of the town, conducting research on the environmental consequences of the dump, confronting local authorities and presenting a legal suit." As a result, the newly elected Mayor decided to relocate the dump. Rector Velasco concluded, "we shared UCC's teaching and research expertise with the community. The university's credibility was useful."

Rector Velasco is motivated to make civic engagement and social responsibility an institutional priority because he believes that "people who have access to knowledge have a social responsibility." He explained, "Very few people in our context have access to a university education. Only 10% of the people in Argentina get a college education; they have a

responsibility to the 90%.” He continued, “Our university cannot be an Ivory Tower because we have social, political and economic problems to face. The knowledge we produce through our research and teaching has to be for the benefit and transformation of our country.”

“There was resistance,” he added, when I asked about his efforts to introduce and impart social responsibility at UCC. Some of the people at UCC, according to Rector Velasco, “didn’t think we needed to worry about where and how knowledge was used or applied.” While the Rector readily recognizes UCC’s intellectual mission, he views social responsibility as both a step forward and a necessity. He believes “people in a university must stand in solidarity with the poor.” He asked, as if to imply the heads of universities and colleges are obligated to choose, “Do we represent people who do not have rights or do we stand against them?”

Rector Velasco is a Jesuit Priest. After his ordination in 1997, he specialized in Spiritual Theology at the University of Comillas in Madrid, Spain. UCC is part of the worldwide network of Jesuit universities (in over 90 countries) and is an active member of the network of Jesuit Universities of Latin America. When asked what he wanted the global movement of civic engagement in higher education to examine in years to come, Rector Velasco replied, “The economic crises in Europe and the U.S. are due, in part, to ethical issues. It is increasingly clear that knowledge must be acquired and used in ways that are socially responsible.” He concluded, “Universities have power and credibility in society; they must have something to say about poverty and inequality. We need to think about what people do with the knowledge they receive from the university and the consequences of those actions. This is an important ethical question.”