

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement - November 2013

Co-edited by Lorraine Hoyt and Amy Newcomb Rowe

We begin with a brief introduction to Mexico and two of its engaged universities: Tecnológico de Monterrey and Universidad Veracruzana. This edition features interviews with Tecnológico de Monterrey University's Rector, David Noel Ramirez-Padilla and Program Director of the Social Citizenship Education Program, Ernesto Benavides Ornelas; and Universidad Veracruzana's Coordinator of International Cooperation, Cliona Maher.

Mexico

Situated in North America, nestled between the Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, sharing borders with Guatemala, Belize and the United States and culturally aligned with South America, Mexico is home to many advanced cultures and civilizations including the Maya, Aztec, and Toltec. Though Spanish is the official national language, the culture supports sixty-two indigenous languages.

Mexico is a proud country despite a complicated history replete with battles against imperial powers. In 1521, the Spanish Empire conquered and colonized much of the territory, which became independent three centuries later in 1821. The Mexican Revolution in 1910, in effect, led to the promulgation of the 1917 Constitution under which Mexico was established as a federal republic, with a popularly elected president and bicameral congress. However, from 1929 to 2000, Mexican politics was dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled through corruption, repression, and corporatism. The National Action Party (PAN) won presidential elections in 2000 and 2006, ending one-party rule. However, the PRI recovered politically and won the presidency in 2012. Although freedom of speech, assembly, and association are guaranteed, the police are sometimes accused of corruption and human rights abuses, often related to the conflict between the government and drug cartels (Freedom in the World, 2013).

Throughout the 20th century, the PRI dominated public life and co-opted unions and other public organizations, limiting the growth of an autonomous civil society, although higher education and Catholic institutions partially escaped state control. Civil society organizations did grow starting in the 1970s, demanding political reforms and helping to end the PRI's one-party rule in 2000 (Vázquez, 2011; 22-26). Voter turnout for presidential elections hovers around 60% since 2000, and lower turnout for congressional midterm elections (IIDEA 2013).

As in many Latin American countries, Mexican higher education has a strong tradition of engagement with the community. Mexico has over 500 public higher education institutions (both federal and state) and over 700 private institutions. Enrollment and research is dominated by public tertiary institutions, although private higher education has been growing. Under Mexican law, in order to receive a bachelor's degree a student must complete at least 480 hours of community service; of the 480 hours of social service, 240 must be devoted to professional experience in their fields of expertise.

Mexican universities are increasingly expanding this requirement beyond basic volunteerism to more sophisticated approaches, engaging more deeply with the community and providing opportunities for students to develop both personally and professionally (Watson et al., 2011; 102, 105-106).

Tecnológico de Monterrey

The mission of Tecnológico de Monterrey (or Tec) is: “to form persons with integrity, ethical standards and a humanistic outlook, who are internationally competitive in their professional fields; at the same time, they will be good citizens committed to the economic, political, social and cultural development of their community and to the sustainable use of natural resources.”

With more than 30 campuses across Mexico, service-learning is being implemented throughout the curriculum at Tec. Today, there are about 70 service-learning courses engaging more than 200 civic groups reaching about 5,000 students per semester (Watson et al., *The Engaged University*, p. 108.)

Tec is a pioneering leader in measuring student learning outcomes. The university has for several years surveyed current students and recent graduates to assess their learning of values and skills with respect to ethics and citizenship. Tec’s experience and research results are a rich resource for heads of other engaged universities (Hoyt and Hollister, 2014).

The Institute for Sustainable Social Development (IDeSS), one of Tec’s innovative initiatives, supports a system of social incubators and community learning centers throughout Mexico that connect with communities near Tec’s campuses. Under their professors’ guidance, students take part in knowledge transfer by providing online assistance to micro-enterprises and tutoring in areas such as health and housing. The community learning centers benefit from the support of Tec but are largely operated by the Department of Social Development, state governments, companies, or civil society organizations. They are educational spaces providing opportunity to individuals in geographically isolated areas or who lack access to traditional education (IDeSS, 2013). This is one example of how Tec aims to shape its students into agents of change. Tec represents Latin America in the Kettering Foundation-Talloires Network research collaboration, which aims to explore regional best practices and perspectives in university civic engagement programs. Tec’s Creating Communities for Development program was the 2011 third place [MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship winner](#); Tec is also participating in the Talloires Network and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid’s [University Volunteer Program](#).

Universidad Veracruzana

Universidad Veracruzana (UV) was founded when the professional arts schools and higher education providers in the state of Veracruz merged in 1944. Today, UV has 5 regional campuses with a presence in 28 municipalities; it is the most decentralized public university in Mexico. UV has a humanistic tradition and social vocation. It is committed to offering and providing education and culture to all sectors of society.

In 1993, UV created a social engagement program called University Social Service Brigades (known as BUSS in Spanish). BUSS is a novel approach to Mexico's compulsory social service, providing students with an opportunity to carry out community work in impoverished, and often marginalized, indigenous communities. A BUSS program, the University Houses Program, was the 2012 first place [MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship](#) winner. The Intercultural Universidad Veracruzana (UVI) was created in 2005 to support collaborations in such areas of the state as *Huasteca*, *Totonacapan*, *Grandes Montañas* and *Selvas*. UVI offers a Degree Program in Intercultural Management for Development with 5 disciplinary orientations (Law, Communication, Health, Sustainability and Languages), promoting higher education and employment, sustainable community development and strengthening local languages and cultures throughout Veracruz. To date, about 4,000 students in 40 disciplines have participated in an array of UV Engagement Programs working with NGOs, government agencies and local industries. UV is a Talloires Network [Youth Economic Participation Initiative \(YEPI\)](#) partner institution. Its Engagement Program with the Productive Sector is a strong example of UV's commitment to preparing their students for the emerging economies of Latin America. UV is also participating in the Talloires Network and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid's [University Volunteer Program](#).

David Noel Ramirez-Padilla, Rector, Tecnológico de Monterrey University Mexico
By Amy Newcomb Rowe



At Tecnológico de Monterrey, a private institution established in 1943, “we teach the Trilogy of Social Responsibility: Human Development, Solidarity and Peace,” Rector Ramirez explained from Tec’s central campus in Nuevo León, one of 30 campuses across Mexico including an international [Virtual University](#). The idea, in addition to preparing young people to be competitive professionals, is to work closely with their

universities’ communities to prepare students to be happy and ethical human beings by giving their skills to the service of others. “Our students, as well as myself, have tattooed in our minds and hearts the importance of civic engagement in an ethical way. Upon graduation, students sign a promise to practice their profession ethically, act beyond their own personal needs and to serve others that are in most need.”

For Rector Ramirez, knowing his community and having a socio-economic awareness are the first steps to active community engagement. As a professor of Finance for the last 38 years and prior to his appointment as Tec’s Rector, he taught his students the importance of an ethical perspective to better maneuver the tough environments of materialistic and individualistic ideals in society. The dominant beliefs that corruption and dishonestly bring about prosperity and success oppose the ideas Rector Ramirez emphasize to his staff and students, that in order to be successful business owners, one must first be an ethical human being dealing honestly and giving to others. It has been a primary goal of the Rector and his staff to develop students with social consciences attuned to those living at the base of the pyramid with the greatest needs. “Universities, as anchor institutions, need to be attentive to the surrounding needs in their communities, to eradicate poverty, and corruption. This type of awareness is contagious and is fundamental for any leader,” says Rector Ramirez.

During the last decade, Tec has increased its focus on providing better access to university education for students from diverse backgrounds and as a result became a large contributor to the growth of Mexico’s higher education enrollment. The number of tertiary graduates in Mexico grew 32 percent from 2005 to 2011, and the share of underprivileged students enrolled in higher education from 10 to 21 percent during the same period (World Bank, 2013). In 2011, approximately 91,000 students enrolled at Tec of which 51% received scholarships and financial aid to attend. Tec Virtual University hosted more than 145,000 students in the continuous education programs, which include tailor-made business programs, corporate and top-management courses and social entrepreneurship programs. With research as a key strength of Tec’s approach to solving many of Mexico’s social issues, Rector Ramirez views higher education as a door that should remain open to those who are unemployed and stricken by poverty in order for the community to not simply benefit economically, but to develop in a wider sense, giving people the skills necessary to create their communities in tangible ways unique to their environments. Combining strong research with a tradition

of creating ethical leaders has been Tec's effective practice to reducing social inequality, increasing competitiveness and improving the quality of life for Mexicans.

One of the greatest challenges students encounter in their community engagement projects is creating trust with the community members. It requires research to identify the issues and then also, and more importantly, to identify *with* the issues that both the university and community are encountering. In this way, the students relate and perceive the community and university working together to solve problems. For example in the community of Toluca, the people wanted a new park with recreational facilities. The students assisted by contacting and introducing the city commissioner who helped create the new park. The community and the university took action together to build the park, which diminished the experience of poverty for the people living and using the space. In Rector Ramirez's words, Tec is "not trying to hand communities the solutions, but trying to change their way of thinking, their mentality that they have the power to do something about the issues they are experiencing." The university has a responsibility based on its solidarity with the community because it is mentoring and molding leaders for the future of those communities. The skills students gain at university must be used to serve others trapped in poverty or who are victims of the political system.

Asked about the future of civic engagement in higher education, Rector Ramirez emphasized the importance of team efforts, particularly in terms of assessing community needs by involving everyone across sectors and potential barriers. In addition, Tec's professional staff development is an important component for training the next generation of civic engagement leaders enabling staff to participate in certificate programs on ethics and citizenship. In Mexico, Tec is leading with new and innovative ways to engage students within the Triology of Social Responsibility. "Sharing and giving to others strengthens peace among people," says Rector Ramirez, "I always remind my students, we are responsible for one another, and in order to have peace, we must give back."

Rector Ramirez has received several prestigious awards throughout his career: Price-Waterhouse Award, Charles Elizundia Award, Distinguished Sanjuanense Presea, awarded by the state government of Jalisco, also that Pope John Paul II named him a Knight of the Order of St. Gregory the Great and the Mexican Institute of Public Accountants awarded him the Distinguished Professor medal. In 2006, he received the Ricardo Margáin Zozaya Medal for Citizenship Involvement for his enthusiasm in promoting ethical values in his country.

David Noel Ramírez-Padilla, Rector, Tecnológico de Monterrey, México

By Amy Newcomb Rowe and Brianda Hernandez



El Tecnológico de Monterrey (Tec) es una institución privada sin fines de lucro establecida en 1943 “nosotros enseñamos algo que a mi me gusta llamar, la Trilogía de la Responsabilidad Social: El Desarrollo, Solidaridad y la Paz.” El Rector Ramírez explicó desde el campus central del Tec en Nuevo León, uno de los 31 campus en México. (Borrar la oración de Universidad Virtual) Además de preparar a jóvenes para que sean

profesionales competitivos, también trabajan con las comunidades borrar “alrededor de las universidades” para preparar a los estudiantes para que sean humanos felices y éticos, ofreciendo sus habilidades para el servicio a los demás. “Nuestros estudiantes, como yo, tenemos tatuado en nuestras mentes y corazones la importancia al compromiso cívico en una forma ética. Cuando se gradúan los estudiantes, prometen practicar sus profesiones en una forma ética, y actuar mas allá de sus necesidades personales para estar al servicio de los mas necesitados.”

Para Ramírez, conocer su comunidad y tener conciencia de la situación socioeconómica de las comunidades y de México son los primeros pasos para el compromiso cívico activo. Como Profesor de Finanzas por los últimos treinta y ocho años y antes de su asignación como Rector del Tec, le enseñaba a sus estudiantes la importancia de ser profesionales éticos para mejor manejar el ambiente materialista y individualista en la sociedad. Las creencias dominantes que la corrupción y la deshonestidad traen la prosperidad son ideas que el Rector Ramírez se opone y trata de enfocar esto con los estudiantes y la academia de profesores que para ser dueños de empresas exitosas, uno tiene que ser una persona ética, siendo honesta y ofreciéndose a los demás. Esto sido una meta primordial del Rector y sus colegas a desarrollar en los estudiantes con un profundo sentido humano para ayudar aquellos que están en la base de la pirámide con grandes necesidades. “Universidades, como instituciones claves, necesitan estar atentos a las necesidades de sus comunidades, para erradicar la pobreza y la corrupción. Este tipo de conocimiento es contagioso y es fundamental para cualquier líder,” dice Rector Ramírez.

Durante la última década, el Tec ha incrementado su enfoque en mejorar el acceso a la educación universitaria para esos estudiantes con diversos orígenes, y como resultado ha contribuido en gran parte al crecimiento de matrícula de la educación superior en México. El número de estudiantes graduados de la universidad creció 32 por ciento del 2005 al 2011, y el porcentaje de estudiantes de bajos recursos matriculados en la educación superior creció del 10 al 21 por ciento en ese mismo periodo. En el 2011, aproximadamente 91,000 estudiantes fueron inscritos en Tec de los cuales 51% recibieron becas y asistencia financiera. La Universidad Tec Virtual recibió mas de 145,000 estudiantes en programas de educación continua, que incluye programas empresariales a la medida, cursos corporativos y de gerencia administrativa y programas para el espíritu emprendedor social. Con la investigación como una solidez clave del enfoque del Tec como una forma para resolver muchos problemas sociales

de México, el Rector Ramírez ve la educación superior como una puerta que tiene que permanecer abierta para aquellos desempleados y afligidos por la pobreza para que la comunidad no solo beneficie se económicamente, si no para desarrollar en un sentido mas amplio de lo normal, dando a las personas las habilidades necesarias para crear sus comunidades en maneras tangibles únicas a su ambiente. Combinando la tradición del Tec en crear líderes éticos, la investigación ha sido unas de las mejores practicas para reducir la desigualdad, incrementando la competitividad y mejorando la calidad de vida para los Mexicanos.

Unos de los más grandes retos que encuentran los estudiantes en sus proyectos de compromiso cívico y responsabilidad social es crear la confianza con los miembros de la comunidad. Requiere bastante investigación y conciencia de la comunidad para identificar los problemas y más importante identificarse con los problemas. En esta forma, los estudiantes pueden relacionarse y percibir la comunidad y la universidad trabajando juntos para resolver los problemas. Por ejemplo, en una comunidad en Toluca, la gente quería un nuevo parque con actividades recreativas. Los estudiantes asistieron en contactar e introducir al comisionado que les ayudó a crear el nuevo parque. La comunidad y la universidad tomaron acción juntos para construir el parque, disminuyendo la experiencia de la pobreza para las personas viviendo y usando el parque. En las palabras del Rector Ramírez, en el Tec no “estamos tratando de darles las soluciones, sino estamos tratando de cambiarles la forma de pensar, la mentalidad que ellos tienen para poder de resolver los problemas de su comunidad.” La universidad tiene su responsabilidad basada en la solidaridad con la comunidad a través de la formación de líderes para el futuro de las comunidades. La habilidades que obtienen los estudiantes en la universidad deben ser usadas para el servicio de aquellos que están atrapados en la pobreza o que son víctimas de la desigualdad.

Cuando se le preguntó sobre el futuro del compromiso cívico y responsabilidad social en la educación superior, el Rector Ramírez destacó la importancia del esfuerzo colectivo. Sobre todo, para la evaluación de las necesidades de la comunidad involucrando a todos los diferentes sectores. Además, el desarrollo profesional del personal del Tec es un componente importante para entrenar la siguiente generación de líderes para el compromiso cívico y la responsabilidad social, permitiendo que los profesores participen en cursos de ciudadanía y de ética. En México, el Tec es un líder con sus nuevas e innovadoras formas para comprometer a los estudiantes a través de la Trilogía de la Responsabilidad Social. “Compartiendo y dando a los demás fortalece la paz entre la gente” dice el Rector Ramírez, “Yo siempre les recuerdo a los estudiantes, somos responsables del uno al otro, para tener paz uno tiene que dar.”

El Rector Ramirez ha recibido varios premios prestigiosos como: Premio Price-Waterhouse, Premio Charles Elizundia, Distinguido Presidente Sanjuanense otorgado por el Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, también fue nombrado Caballero de la orden de San Gregorio por el Papa Juan Pablo II y le fue otorgado por el Instituto Mexicano de Contadores Públicos el premio de Profesor Distinguido. En el 2006, recibió la medalla Ricardo Margain Zozaya por su compromiso con la ciudadanía y su entusiasmo a la promoción de valores éticos en su país.

Ernesto Benavides Ornelas, Program Director of the Social Citizenship Education Program of Tecnológico de Monterrey University

By Brianda Hernandez and Lorlene Hoyt



Our interview with Ernesto Benavides Ornelas, Program Director of the Social Citizenship Education Program, started with his recollection of the underlying question that prompted the creation of Tec's mission. He explained, "We asked ourselves, when will we cease to live in a social system that perpetuates inequalities, inequity and creates vulnerable people?"

Benavides pointed out that the idea of civic engagement in higher education is growing, yet the form it takes varies from nation state to the next, and also varies within individual states. He noted, "fortunately, there are a large number of universities that are acknowledging the importance of civic engagement, but the way they understand their civic engagement role is quite different." He knows Tec and its particular approach to university civic engagement well and described it as an effort to go "beyond charity and philanthropic work" to create "institutional changes in the public sector which includes the culture of politics, public participation in the decision-making processes, and social justice."

This approach, Benavides and his colleagues at Tec believe, should be the aim of the entire university system; civic engagement should cut across different disciplines, permeate individual institutions and reach across multiple campuses. He is "against the notion of creating special offices or centers for university civic engagement" to enhance public participation and collective action. Such a strategy, he believes, "further creates a misalignment of civic engagement goals and activities. He underscored this point with a question followed by a response: "who really believes that a university as a whole cannot be civically engaged? I certainly do not."

Mexico, like many countries around the world, struggles with issues of economic and social inequality. One way Tec is addressing such issues is by involving a variety of professionals in training. We asked Benavides why Tec is involving students in hands-on problem solving activities with communities, to which he replied, "a major problem is the growing indifference to problems in society. This paralyzes progress. We strive to solve this problem by teaching students, through hands-on experience, the importance of injecting into political systems. This is a direct and effective way to change the very systems that perpetuate poverty, corruption and impunity." Specifically, Tec relies on service-learning, a pedagogy that connects the classroom with the community partners to enhance student learning and societal outcomes. "Service-learning is as important as other academic requirements" at Tec, Benavides explained.

Though Tec is a leader among institutions of higher education that are engaged and committed to social responsibility, according to Benavides there have been "significant setbacks." He continued, "one of the obstacles Tec experienced was the challenge of understanding how these institutional changes would occur." He and his colleagues found that "active dialogue and ongoing reflection" was a good beginning for the change

process. These methods help the Tec community learn more about themselves and the communities in which they are working. Benavides elaborated, “students working in these marginalized communities have emersed themselves in different political systems. We are now beginning to see that they are contributing to a more active and democratic system. They are developing the skills that enable them to realize social change.” He also warned that the “battle” continues. It is not time to claim victory. What is needed, he argued, “is real institutional change in all civic programs until we cease to produce and perpetuate social problems.”

As the interview came to a close, Benavides explained the importance of university civic engagement from the faculty perspective: “as soon as a professor in a univesity stops sharing or extending knowledge beyond the classroom, he or she becomes obsolete.” The social reality is that “the university can no longer resist the separation between professions and public life, the very separation that has caused so much harm.”

Ernesto Benavides Ornelas graduated from Universidad Autónoma Agraria Antonio Narro in Saltillo, Coahuila, as an Agricultural Engineer in 1991. He earned a Master of Science in Agriculture and Livestock Productivity as a National Council of Science and Technology Scholar and a Masters in Administration with a specialization in Human Resources in 1996. He also graduated from LASPAU, a Program for Strengthening Social Leadership in Schools in Latin America in 2003 as a fellow for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. He has served as a Research Professor participating in institutions like the National Peasant Confederation of the State of Tamaulipas, and Tecnológico de Monterrey in the Biotechnology Development Center, and at the Center for Strategic Planning in the areas of Agriculture and Agribusiness.

Ernesto Benavides Ornelas, Director Nacional del Programa de Formación Social y Ciudadana del Tecnológico de Monterrey, México

By Brianda Hernandez and Lorraine Hoyt



Nuestra entrevista con Ernesto Benavides Ornelas, director nacional del Programa de Formación Social y Ciudadana, empezó con su recuerdo que impulso la creación de la misión de Tec, “Nosotros nos preguntamos, ¿Cuándo dejaremos de vivir un sistema social que replica y replica la vulnerabilidad, la desigualdad, la inequidad?”

Ernesto indicó que la idea del compromiso cívico en la educación superior esta creciendo, pero la forma en que está creciendo es diferente de país a país, también es diferente entre personas. El explico, “Afortunadamente, hoy en día una importante cantidad de universidades le está dando importancia a su misión cívica. Pero la forma en que la entiende aún es muy distinta.” El conoce como Tec el compromiso cívico y lo describe como un esfuerzo que “va mas alla de hacer caridad o filantropia” para crear “cambios estructurales en el sector publico que incluye la cultura política, participación democrática, y la justicia social.”

Ernesto y sus colegas creen que esta forma de compromiso cívico y responsabilidad social debe ser el enfoque de todo el sistema universitario, el compromiso cívico debe ser el enfoque que debe darse a todo tipo de disciplinas. El declara “estoy en desacuerdo con esa corriente que habla de la importancia de crear una oficina de Responsabilidad Social Universitaria. ¿a quién se le ocurre pensar que la universidad puede ser NO socialmente responsable? aunque sea por un instante. No lo concibo.”

Mexico, como muchos otros países, lucha con los problemas de la desigualdad económica y social. Una forma que el Tec esta abordando esos problemas es involucrando a profesores y estudiantes. Le preguntamos a Ernesto porque el Tec está involucrando a los estudiantes en actividades practicas con las comunidades para resolver problemas, el respondió, “Uno de los grandes problemas que tratamos de resolver es la indiferencia. Esto paraliza el progreso. Nos esforzamos a resolver este problema enseñándoles a nuestros estudiantes con experiencia practica y la importancia de que entiendan que el involucramiento en la cultural política es necesario para participar como ciudadanos e incidir en provocar cambios en el funcionamiento del sistema político que es el que genera pobreza, corrupción, impunidad, programas sociales deficientes malos diseños de políticas sociales en México.” El Tec depende de el enseñamiento través de la práctica, una pedagogia que conecta los estudiantes con socios de la comunidad para aumentar el aprendizaje y resultados sociales. “La importancia del compromiso cívico es tan importante como cualquier otro requisito académico para que el alumno se gradúe” en Tec.

Aunque Tec, es un líder entre instituciones de la educación superior que están comprometidas a la responsabilidad social, Ernesto dice que Tec ha tenido obstáculos. El explico, “Uno de los obstáculos que tuvo el Tec, fue el reto de comprender como los cambios estructurales iban a ocurrir.” Ernesto y sus colegas encontraron que el

“comprender el entorno y lo que sucede era el primer paso necesario. Lo segundo fue establecer el Dialogo y la deliberación de ideas para reflexionar sobre lo que se comprendía” es una de las mejores practicas. Estos métodos ayudaron al Tec a aprender mas sobre si mismos y las comunidad a las que ayudan. Ernesto mencionó, “Los estudiantes en la comunidad se involucran en los sistemas políticos, vinculando su profesión con los asuntos de la vida pública. Ahora podemos empezar a visualizar una sociedad más participativa, una sociedad civil política y democráticamente más fuerte con una capacidad de autogestión que cumple la función de suelo fértil para impulsar cambios sociales impulsados por ellos mismos.” Ernesto también advirtió que “no debemos asumir” que hemos cumplido lo que queremos lograr. No podemos cantar victoria. Lo que se necesita, el dice, “ es un cambio estructural que deje de perpetuar problemas sociales.”

Cuando la entrevista llego a su fin, Ernesto explicó la importancia de la participación cívica universitaria desde la perspectiva docente: "Tan pronto como un profesor en la universidad deja de compartir o extender el conocimiento más allá del aula, él o ella se convierte obsoleto." La realidad social es que "la universidad no puede seguir propiciando una separación entre la profesión y la vida pública, la misma separación que ha causado tanto daño".

Ernesto Benavides Ornelas es Director Nacional de Formación Social y Ciudadana del Tecnológico de Monterrey desde 1998. Coordinador de la Academia Nacional de Ciudadanía y líder Académico del programa de Aprendizaje-Servicio. Graduado del Programa para el Fortalecimiento del Liderazgo Social por el Academic and Professional Programs for the Americas (LASPAU) afiliado a Universidad de Harvard. Candidato a Doctor en Antropología Social por la Universidad de Salamanca España. Ingeniero Agrónomo por la Universidad Autónoma Agraria Antonio Narro; Maestro en Ciencias y Maestro en Administración de Negocios por el Tecnológico de Monterrey. Trabajó en la Confederación Nacional Campesina de Tamaulipas, y ha sido profesor investigador en la Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, el Centro de Desarrollo Biotecnológico y el Centro de Estudios Estratégicos del Tecnológico de Monterrey.

Cliona Maher, Coordinator of International Cooperation, Universidad Veracruzana
By Ahsen Utku and Lorraine Hoyt



Over twenty years ago the Universidad Veracruzana (UV) developed an innovative project for Mexico's 480 hours of compulsory social service for UV's undergraduate students. According to Cliona Maher, UV's International Cooperation Associate, Social Service is based on "the idea to give something back to the country for receiving free public education." At UV, the Mexican social service initiative started with health science, medical nutrition and dental students working with communities lacking basic health services. Today, the idea has spread to all fields of study at UV, with a variety of disciplines involved in ways that contribute to society while developing relevant professional skills. "They are global citizens," says Maher, describing the role of the students. Emphasizing the capacity of and impact on participating students, Maher highlighted both the community and the students are changed through the engagement with one another. With regard to student outcomes, she explains, "once the students become a part of this project, they become more resourceful. They think bigger and overcome obstacles much easier."

Maher and others appreciate UV's humanistic mission. Maher made note of UV's stance regarding open access to knowledge commenting, "it's one of the few universities with a very large publishing house. It publishes books and sells them at very cheap prices." She continued, "all of the first-year students receive a free collection of classic books. The history of the university includes social vocation."

Originally from Ireland and based in Mexico for the last 18 years, Maher regularly observes the challenges in everyday life as well as the impacts of civic engagements on higher education. Reflecting on work at UV, she explains, "we had ground breaking results, such as the empowerment of women in local communities. The issues we are trying to address are varied and include poverty, mal nutrition, unemployment, lack of access to education, culture, health, sustainable development and empowerment of the local community." UV has adopted the longer view, implementing projects aimed at improving the quality of life for the society's disadvantaged and marginalized. Projects are created in collaboration with community participants who take the lead in determining and articulating their needs. The process involves university faculty and students.

UV, however, has faced numerous challenges over the years. One of the greatest obstacles to sustainable development in Mexico is corruption and a lack of commitment by local public authorities. Moreover, elections frequently result in turnover in the representation as well as priorities. As a result, civic engagement projects are unearthed soon after they begin to grow roots. Maher described a dynamic and sometimes turbulent political environment with each party wanting "to be seen doing something different than the other party."

On the other hand, social service projects with a multidisciplinary focus offer inspiration. UV students from different departments hold meetings together each week to learn more about each other's work, which is a very successful model from Maher's

perspective. “For instance, agriculture students have teamed up with business students and very successful agricultural businesses have formed,” she says, “this makes them think outside the box and learn to work effectively with other disciplines.”

This way of “civic learning”, as Maher calls it, is an integral part of the university’s curriculum. UV offers a flexible educational model, where students have the chance to focus skills for tackling relevant issues in the region. Civic learning takes place on two levels with students receiving ongoing feedback from faculty as well as community leaders. Local community participation in student evaluation is a key aspect of the project, according to Maher. In addition to earning credits toward their degree, students are encouraged to relate their theses to their civil service work. In this way graduating students have developed critical skills while advancing important projects. Maher highlights the work of a UV graduate whose thesis research helped to develop an organic tomato business with community partners into research in wild native chili plants.

Maher also emphasized the attention UV receives from other Latin American universities, explaining, “partnerships with other universities are fostered often through the InterAmerican Organization for Higher Education (IOHE). Also the Mexican Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutes (ANUIES) gives grants to students who participate in community engagement programs throughout Mexico as well as annual awards to engaged universities and colleges. “Through the IOHE, we increasingly have more regional partners. UV also hosts exchange students from other universities in Latin America. Maher points to a promising future, concluding, “for us, it’s a first step in sharing and learning more about how universities practice civic engagement.”

Clíona Maher is the International Cooperation Associate for Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico. She pursued undergraduate studies in Humanities at the University of Limerick, Ireland, Universidad de Cantabria and Universidad de Cádiz, Spain and was awarded a Scholarship from the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs to study a PhD in Public Law at Universidad Veracruzana. Maher has worked in educational and cultural international cooperation for Universidad Veracruzana and the Veracruz state Ministry of Education in Mexico since 2001, establishing international partnerships to benefit educational community engagement projects in Veracruz. She is very interested in the social responsibility of higher education institutions and how higher education can play a key role in promoting local empowerment and self-sustained ethical development on a local, regional and global level.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the Talloires Network's regional partner, The Latin American Center for Service-Learning (CLAYSS) as well as its other partner institutions in Mexico including Universidad Xochicalco, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Instituto Politécnico Nacional and Universidad de Guadalajara. We also thank John Pollock for his research on Mexico.

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