

The Nicaragua Initiative at Seattle University: A Strategic Framework

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As an expression of its commitment to global engagement in the Jesuit educational tradition, Seattle University has launched the Nicaragua Initiative in partnership with the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua, Nicaragua.

Formally begun in 2014 with a signed memorandum of understanding, this partnership is built upon many years of collaborative activities impacting students, faculty, staff, and administrative leaders. An initial series of student service experiences in the late 1990's developed into annual SU faculty/staff immersions starting in 2001, and these engagements between SU and UCA led to multiple joint initiatives culminating with the hosting of an UCA delegation on the SU campus in 2013. Mutual campus visits since then by the SU and UCA presidents—Fr. Steve Sundborg and Fr. Chepe Idiaquez—led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding. The agreement between SU and UCA provides the foundation, and this strategic framework offers the broad outlines of the partnership for an initial three-year period from 2014-2017. There are three main areas of engagement described below.

Student Engagement

Cross-Cultural Competencies: The partnership will develop and deepen student engagement opportunities through courses, internships, and research. There are a wide range of course topics and modules that may be beneficial to students in each institution, such as the study of Spanish and English, economic development, entrepreneurship, environmental studies, the sciences, and other areas. Given the interconnected, globalized world where our respective students will build their careers, learning experiences which involve different cultural settings increase cultural competencies and better prepare our graduates for the challenges of today's professional world.

Experiential Learning: In addition to study, both universities underscore the importance of providing our students with the opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in internships and research endeavors. The UCA and SU have many close relationships with local nonprofits and community development agencies that can serve as possible host organizations for student internships. At the UCA, there is an office for academic service learning, campus ministry, and the multiple research and development institutes affiliated with the UCA and working throughout the country. At SU, we have long-term contacts with our local partners through the Center for Service and Community Engagement, as well as through partnerships built by the colleges and departments such as Arts and Science's Social Work program and Matteo Ricci College's local internship program, for example.

Research: Student research opportunities are important for both the UCA and SU. The goal is to support faculty-led research efforts with students in both countries, thereby providing

theoretical and methodological support to students as well as advancing the research agendas of faculty from both universities.

Faculty Engagement

The partnership will develop and deepen faculty engagement through exchanges, teaching opportunities, and research initiatives. Faculty exchanges and teaching opportunities are an important aspect of the agreement between our two universities. The exchange of faculty can have an exponential impact in achieving initiative goals: one faculty member travels and teaches priority courses at the other university. Already the UCA is sending Professor Haydee Granados to teach Gender and Women's Studies classes in Spring Quarter 2015 at SU. Discussions are underway for a similar arrangement in the near future to send SU faculty to UCA for brief residencies. We hope to build out this activity in a fashion that benefits as many students and colleges as possible.

In addition to teaching, faculty-led research projects are an essential component of the Nicaragua Initiative. Such research can help provide faculty from both institutions with the opportunity to deepen their scholarly pursuits, collaborate in creative ways, and generate new and invigorating lines of research. Already there is a small but committed group of faculty at SU from across the different colleges who speak Spanish, have built relationships in Nicaragua, and are interested in research there. For the first two years of the Nicaragua Initiative, the goal is to facilitate up to a half dozen collaborative research projects among SU and UCA faculty that respond to initiative themes and benefit the most people possible.

Institutional Engagement

The partnership will develop and deepen institutional engagement through sharing of knowledge, best practices, and processes, and through mission and ministry collaboration. As two Jesuit Catholic universities with similar missions, Seattle University and the Universidad Centroamericana are well-positioned to contribute to one another at a broader institutional level. This collaboration can include such areas as university advancement, alumni relations, long-term financial sustainability, community outreach, and other shared priorities.

In addition to sharing knowledge, both SU and UCA are committed to deepening the Jesuit Catholic mission that connects our institutions. We recognize the opportunity that is represented by our participation in the global Jesuit higher education network, and see that we can strengthen one another's Jesuit character through exchanges, shared programs, and ministry opportunities.

One example of this engagement is the Ignatian Retreat Exchange during the 2014-15 academic year, sending two spiritual directors to join the companion university's Ignatian retreat team in November (SU) and in March (UCA). Additionally, SU will focus its annual Mission Day in April, 2016, on the SU-UCA partnership, and the way it represents an expression of the Jesuit global higher education.

Learning and Action Themes:

To help focus the student, faculty and institutional engagement, SU and UCA would like to support involvement that relates to two major themes, guiding activities of the first three years of the Nicaragua Initiative (2014-2017).

1. Youth and Immigration: For both UCA and SU, the topics of youth and immigration, and their intersection, are important areas of interest and concern. Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and this adversely affects young people. 40 percent of young Nicaraguans are unemployed or work in the informal sector while 50 percent live in poverty. Almost one million adolescents and young adults are considered disadvantaged in one way or another. These factors increase the vulnerability of girls and young women to gender-based violence as well as the risks of minority groups such as the Garifunas and indigenous groups out on the Caribbean Coast of the country. These conditions of poverty act as push-factors on young people compelling them to leave their communities of origin for larger cities and other countries, including the United States and Costa Rica. In Seattle, unequal educational opportunities for youth from families with fewer resources have inspired the creation of the Seattle University Youth Initiative. The Youth Initiative has helped to focus SU energy on our local neighborhood – which includes many immigrant families from around the world – to strengthen opportunities for youth and their families, and in collaboration with the city, foundations, and human service organizations, to provide a “pipeline of support” so that they may obtain their educational goals.

2. Economic Development and Environmental Sustainability: UCA and SU share an interest in these two key areas and their intersection. Nicaragua’s main economic drivers are their agricultural production and the use of their vast natural resources. Supporting economic development and environmental sustainability in Nicaragua covers a wide range of activities from sustainable farming practices (coffee), small and medium enterprise development, and research about the long-term impacts of the inter-oceanic canal that the Nicaraguan government commenced in December 2014. Scientists, engineers, and social scientists at the UCA are extremely concerned about the environmental, cultural, and political costs of the project, and collaboration with SU can be an important support whether in the form of critical analysis, feasibility studies or helping develop mitigation strategies if the project continues forward. In Seattle, SU has recently launched a Center for Environmental Justice and Sustainability, which is helping to focus attention on teaching and research that explores a range of issues including sustainable energy, climate change, environmental degradation, and unequal burdens for marginalized populations – all topics that resonate with the broader Seattle community and Pacific Northwest region.

Each year we will endeavor to have collaborative activities that benefit both university communities with respect to the two action themes. Such activities will include opportunities for engagement at the student, faculty and institutional levels, and may include courses, research initiatives, campus visits/lectures, conferences, and different forms of exchange.