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We Are One

Latin America and Jesuit Higher Education

By Olivia Quiroz Centeno

It has taken many years, meetings, e-mails, drafts, and prayers to achieve the rich and effective collaboration evident today among Jesuit universities within Mexico and throughout Latin America. But I can attest that for my university, Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla (Ibero Puebla), a 32-year-old institution with about 4,500 students, collaborative relationships with other Jesuit universities have become our richest resource. For us, the Mexican Jesuit University System (known as the SUJ), a group of eight institutions, and the Association of Jesuit Latin American Universities (known as AUSJAL), an organization of 31 institutions, are lifelines that enrich and intensify Ibero Puebla's contribution to Jesuit higher education. Participation in these networks certainly has not meant that we – or other Jesuit institutions, for that matter – have been liberated from an array of local and universal challenges related to higher education, but it has meant that we can draw on a vast and vital community of faculty and administrators who contribute to a deep well of wisdom that helps us at Ibero Puebla to thrive.

Mexico's eight SUJ institutions have a relatively brief history but one that has helped promote a sense of shared responsibility and mission. The oldest, Ibero Ciudad de México, was founded in 1943, while the youngest, the Instituto Superior Intercultural Ayuuk, was founded in 2006 to serve the Oaxacan rural indigenous community. Ibero Puebla itself has been guided especially by our sister institutions in Mexico City and Guadalajara, from whom, for example, our faculty have received superb direction about how to integrate Ignatian pedagogy into their work. Our sister institutions have also assisted us by

collaborating in our efforts to form international partnerships, connections that have led to fruitful student exchanges both within the SUJ system and internationally.

Because Latin American nations share so much in terms of history as well as social, economic, and political circumstances, the possibilities of collaborative work among SUJ and AUSJAL universities have been relatively easy to bring about. One major example of this is the founding of AUSJAL itself in 1985. Today, as many Jesuit institutions around the world are just beginning to think seriously about international collaboration, AUSJAL, which includes universities in 14 different countries, has already marked its 30th anniversary. Among the greatest achievements of AUSJAL has been its ability to build a network of networks that can identify shared priorities across the boundaries of region and nation and sustain specific initiatives and projects according to those priorities. Since AUSJAL is organized to look beyond the many kinds of difference – not only the difference of national identities, but also differences in institutional size, degree offerings, and student populations – it is poised to allow each institution to contribute effectively both to its local contexts and to a more global sense of a common good.

AUSJAL's organizational structure guarantees participation from various university constituencies that have something important to contribute. Presidents and vice-

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presidents, most of them Jesuits, form the AUSJAL board and set its strategic priorities during their biennial meetings. An executive secretary supports the board and is responsible for coordinating multiple peer networks made up of representatives from the various member institutions. Today there are 12 such peer networks, most involving representatives from all the institutions, working on issues including academic cooperation, poverty, human rights, mission and ministry, information technology, university social responsibility, environment and sustainability, and communication and democracy. Each peer network has a coordinator who oversees on-line communication among representatives and leads a peer network meeting every other year. This allows each group to develop and enact concrete projects in response to the strategic priorities set by the board.

Within the Jesuit networks of Mexico and Latin America, we have found that one of the biggest challenges of collaboration is to maintain direction, to keep our compass while also increasing our effectiveness. As Jesuit institutions we have commonalities that make it relatively easy to collaborate, but the challenge is to balance the input of various stakeholders while maintaining our momentum. It turns out that, when a project is truly collaborative, there is a risk that one or more puzzle pieces may drop out. Consequently, we have learned that it is essential to have very specific goals, regularly updated according to shifting needs, and when goals are accomplished, the results must be widely communicated among the many collaborators.

Another challenge is that in our networking and collaboration we must always prioritize our responsibility to

two distinct groups: first, our students; and second, the people at the borders – not only the geographic borders, but all borders imaginable, including people experiencing spiritual, economic, or cultural needs, people we can assist in so many ways. Noteworthy here is the “Dual Immersion Program,” a collaborative effort involving 20 institutions and cosponsored by AUSJAL and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, which pairs students learning English in Latin America to those learning Spanish in the United States and allows them to practice their skills through interuniversity videoconference language labs. In terms of fulfilling our responsibility to others at the border, we at Ibero Puebla can testify along with our sister schools throughout Latin America to the enormous benefit that student exchanges and service learning courses can bring both to our students and to the people they seek to serve.

Above all, through collaboration, we have come to understand that complex problems are best solved through interuniversity efforts which affirm a sense of joint responsibility, because only through collaboration does the strength of one institution become the strength of the network, achieving greater results across multiple borders and boundaries.

Luis Ugalde, S.J., founder and former president of AUSJAL, put the meaning of a truly collaborative vision in Jesuit higher education in the simplest of terms: “Spiritually we are one Ignatian Latin American university, embodied in 31 different realities.” That is the kind of vision that will be crucial to the future of Jesuit higher education on a global scale. ■