

Central American Exceptions: Institutions that Combine International Cooperation and Local Ingenuity

Nanette Svenson^{a,*}

^a*Tulane University, Panama*

Central America is not known for the quality of its higher education. This is reflected in global data with no Central American universities appearing in the international rankings, few of its university professors holding accredited PhDs, and the region accounting for less than 0.10 percent of global research expenditures and Science Citation Index publications (Svenson 2012). In spite of these dismal statistics, there are some exceptional Central American institutions that produce highly qualified graduates and valuable scientific research—particularly in thematic areas important for national and regional development. These exceptions tend to be non-traditional private institutions that combine inputs from both international cooperation and local and regional resources to create unique, practical applications for knowledge transfer and scientific production. They merit attention not only for their impressive academic achievements but also for the lessons they may offer other countries as strategic investment in applied research becomes increasingly vital for small emerging nations in advancing their development agendas (Holm-Nielsen et al. 2005; Svenson 2012).

The Region and Its Challenges

Central America is made up of seven countries—Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama—that lie between Mexico and South America and support a population of about 42 million, mostly Spanish-speaking inhabitants. Over the years, especially in recent decades, these countries have established increasingly stable democratic governments and currently all fall into the World Bank’s “middle-income” category of developing countries (World Bank 2012). While this indicates progress, the middle-income

classification also means that, notwithstanding a 40 percent overall poverty rate, most of Central America is not poor enough to qualify for much donor assistance.

These circumstances, combined with widespread fiscal limitations and historical reliance on commodities and resource extraction for economic activity, affect educational performance at all levels. Apart from Costa Rica, public spending in Central America on education is below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) annual average of about five percent of GDP (OECD 2012). Primary education completion and literacy rates have improved dramatically in the past decades but there are still major gaps, especially for the higher levels of education. Secondary enrollment is only around 75 percent, with far lower completion rates, and though tertiary enrollment has reached an average of 25 percent of the age cohort, graduation rates are still well below that. Additionally, quality is an issue everywhere. Many reports highlight serious problems across the region with regard to inadequate and outdated teacher training, curricular development, assessment mechanisms, standard setting, and accountability systems (World Bank 2005; Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas [PREAL] 2007; UNESCO 2007).

Central American higher education has expanded and diversified radically in the past twenty years, particularly in the private sector, but not all of the accompanying changes have been beneficial for promoting research and preparing graduates to make a productive contribution to society. Most of the new private universities are for-profit institutions and often criticized for their commercialization of the sector (World Bank 2005; UNESCO- International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [IESALC] 2010). Most of the programs offered through these

*Corresponding author email: nanette.svenson@gmail.com.

Address: Tulane University Law School Payson in the Center for International Development, Panama City, Panama.

schools focus on teaching for a limited selection of low overhead, non-scientific professional preparation with minimal attention to research. Compounding this situation, the reduction of governmental resources allocated to higher education throughout the region in recent years has meant less university funding almost universally. And unlike their industrialized counterparts, Central America funds most of its research (nearly 70 percent) through public expenditures—as opposed to through private industry and foundation support—with some international sources (roughly 20 percent). This represents a major constraint as most Central American governments find it hard enough to budget sufficiently for infrastructure and basic public services, much less for scientific investigation, which tends to be categorized as a luxury. With no established tradition for private sector financing of research, it makes investment in scientific activity extremely difficult (Svenson 2012).

This brief review of the developmental, educational and scientific reality in Central America presents an unpromising picture. Still, some higher education institutions in the region have managed to beat the odds and produce consistently excellent graduates and scientific studies. A few of these institutions are public and a few are traditional private universities—non-state, non-profit, religious or philanthropic institutions. Here, though, we focus on a different, non-traditional, more ambiguous category of international, non-state, non-profit institution since it is with this type of university that more of the professionals and applied research associated with regional and global development objectives are being produced. Also, this model appears to offer more potentially replicable lessons for other developing countries.

International Cooperation and a Non-traditional University Model

Examples of this non-traditional, international non-state university are found in several countries of Central America and represent a variety of administrative structures and academic concentrations. They have in common the following characteristics: they are not public institutions; their curricula focus on specific thematic

areas of regional importance for development; and they leverage international cooperation as a means to achieving and maintaining their scientific research productivity. Their individual and collective success exemplifies how local academics have been able to partner with international counterparts—multilateral and bilateral organizations, along with recognized universities and private sector actors from both OECD and Latin American economies—to provide an applied, practice-oriented type of higher education and research in Central America that propels important aspects of development. Costa Rica, where national policy and investment have been aimed historically at advancing educational achievement, hosts more of these universities, but similar institutions are also found in other parts of Central America. These schools generally offer a limited range of degrees, often only at the graduate or undergraduate level in a single academic discipline. They devote significant resources to applied research, project development, and consulting as a means of generating both knowledge and revenue. Most operate bilingually, in Spanish and English, and attract international faculty and student bodies. They are also accredited—internationally, nationally or regionally—which is unusual in the region and offers a distinct competitive advantage (Jain 2011).

Examples of this type of higher education and research institution include the following: Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (Center for Tropical Agricultural Research and Education [CATIE]); the Escuela de Agricultura de la Región Tropical Húmeda (School of Tropical Agriculture [EARTH University]); the Escuela Agrícola Panamericana Zamorano (Zamorano Pan-American Agricultural School); the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American School of Social Sciences [FLACSO]); the Instituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas (INCAE Business School); and the Universidad de la Paz (University for Peace [UPEACE]). CATIE, EARTH, INCAE and UPEACE are based in Costa Rica; FLACSO is in Costa Rica and Guatemala (and also in El Salvador with a smaller program); and Zamorano is in Honduras. Each has a regional Central and Latin American research orientation,

rather than a more narrow national concentration, and focuses on relatively few thematic areas. The schools' corresponding degrees, research and publications fall into two general categories of study: earth and environmental sciences (CATIE, EARTH, and Zamorano) and social sciences (INCAE, FLACSO, and UPEACE). Both of these areas are integral to all Central American countries' development and directly linked with national and regional economic and social agendas.

CATIE, EARTH, and Zamorano teach and study subjects related to natural resource management and sustainable tropical agriculture. FLACSO, originally founded with support from UNESCO, is part of a larger Latin American institution devoted to the social sciences; it offers degrees and conducts research in areas such as social development and public policy; migration; economic development; decentralization, democratic governance and political institutions; sustainable tourism; social movements; globalization, markets and inequality; and citizen security. INCAE is dedicated to solely to graduate level study and research in business administration and is affiliated with Harvard Business School. UPEACE is an independent, international, United Nations-mandated institution of higher education for promoting studies on peace, security, governance and sustainable development.

Keys to Success

Although these institutions are different in many ways, they share a number of features that can be linked to their success and that are both internationally and internally organizational in nature. Internationally, all are registered as international organizations dedicated to higher education and research. Their international mission status allows for independence from national government or inter-governmental control and grants autonomy beyond national and regional boundaries. Additionally, these institutions all began with financial and academic support from important international backers and have historically counted on executive boards made up of renowned international scholars and professionals. This propels attraction of international faculty and student bodies, fostering environments of

stimulating diversity that include a wide range of nationalities, socioeconomic backgrounds, life experience and academic orientation. It also means professors are internationally trained and credentialed, which promotes a higher level of academic achievement—particularly for training in research methods—than is typically available in the region. This ensures a more stable human resource base for the formulation and implementation of research projects and for bilingual communications. The international composition of board and faculty also drives the establishment of international academic standards for curricula and for publishing. Adherence to globally accepted standards and methods is essential as internationally compatible curricula and guidelines are what allow for student transferability, and international peer-reviewed publishing is what allows for academic exchange, dissemination of research findings and collegiate cooperation.

The international orientation of these non-traditional universities helps them develop another valuable asset: their extensive global networks. These networks manage relationships with local, regional and international alumni, faculty, board members, partner institutions, clients and other affiliates. They also lead to potential new partners and associates, which can expand research and consulting options, faculty and student bodies, and funding mechanisms. As an example, CATIE claims a network of over 400 strategic partners that include universities, research institutes, development centers, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, cooperatives, small and medium-sized businesses and corporations, all of which facilitate dissemination of scientific knowledge and practical experience in order to further public and private sector development (CATIE 2011). Similarly, INCAE counts among its critical worldwide network most Latin American governments; the major Central American integration organizations; US and European bilateral organizations; multilateral development organizations such as the World Bank, International Finance Corporation, World Economic Forum, and Inter-American Development Bank, and the United Nations; global foundations like AVINA, Soros, the Inter-American Foundation and Ford; and dozens of regional

business associations (INCAE 2012). International affiliation also drives institutional accreditation processes, which further enhance global academic reputations and possibilities for exchange. Accreditation—as opposed to simple recognition from a national ministry of education—facilitates better cross-border assurance of educational and investigative rigor. It enables international comparison, transfer of credits between institutions and improved research collaboration. It also serves as an impetus for institutions to maintain and expand their research activity in an effort to retain their standing. All of the Central American exceptions presented here are accredited (or in the process of becoming so, as with Zamorano), some by multiple institutions, despite the lack of accreditation culture in the region.

Apart from these universities' international affiliations that enhance their assets, several aspects of their internal organization contribute significantly to their success. First and foremost, they are all organized as non-profit institutions, which allows for reinvestment of all revenue generated beyond their ongoing expenditures. This is critical for keeping tuition costs reasonable and enabling expensive research. Second, these universities have finance structures that are supported by multiple national and international funding sources. Student fees, alumni and organizational donations, national and international development and consulting projects, research funding and entrepreneurial enterprises all contribute to these institutions' independent financing. This diversifies their risk and broadens their revenue generating opportunities. Third, each of these institutions has a relatively narrow thematic focus in an academic area closely linked to development. This promotes strengthening of niche expertise and avoidance of over-extension at the same time as it opens the institutions to technical cooperation benefits. Finally, these universities have all developed in-house capacity for producing internationally competitive project proposals and academic journal publications—in English and Spanish. These abilities broaden the institutions' fundraising and knowledge generation reach and strengthen their academic reputations, international recognition and branding power. Like universities and research centers everywhere, these schools struggle to

maintain the levels of financial and human resources necessary for generating high-quality, international standard research. Nevertheless, the combination of international and internal factors reviewed here appreciably aids their efforts and distinguishes them from their counterparts in the region.

Conclusion

In spite of its poor reputation for research and educational productivity, Central America does foment innovative activity in these areas, much of which comes from the non-traditional, private international centers described above. This model has benefitted from its international mission status and connections with high profile academic, professional and development organizations worldwide. It has also benefitted from an approach that links applied research with teaching, outreach and technical cooperation and that concentrates on singular thematic concentrations tied to regional development objectives. Part of this model's success in Central America may also have to do with the national regulatory environment and sociopolitical conditions found in Costa Rica, host country to the majority of the institutions examined here.

The private, non-profit international university concept is important because of its potential as an international development tool—one that benefits both industrialized and developing countries. The type of collaborative educational research center that combines strengths and resources of international organizations, universities and scholars with those of local and regional actors may offer an effective instrument for other developing regions as well. The global community can provide a necessary and pivotal partner for this. International cooperation can assist with supplemental knowledge, human and financial resourcing, and redirection of research agendas and incentives toward development goals. When combined with local and regional intellectual capacity and insight, international cooperation works to its greatest potential and shifts from being a conditioned, unsustainable imposition to being an integrated collegial partner contributing to practical, sustainable, knowledge-generating solutions.

In this regard, the Central American experience with private, international institutions may have some valuable lessons to offer the rest of the developing—and developed—world.

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