

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Educating Mexico's Indians

Eager students at a new university must teach themselves in stark conditions

By *MARION LLOYD*

The Chronicle of Higher Education [2003-1-24]

MOCHICAHUI, México _ The motto of the new university that has sprung up from the ruins of this colonial town in northwestern Mexico is simple: "All the people, all the peoples." But the goal of inclusion has taken almost 500 years and at least one armed uprising to achieve.

The Autonomous Indigenous University of Mexico is the first large-scale attempt to provide a college education to the country's 10 million Indians. Through an unconventional study plan -- no professors and no classrooms -- and an inventive curriculum, the institution's founders, a group of academics from the University of the West, in nearby Los Mochis, have sought since 1999 to meld a traditional Western education with an emphasis on knowledge that is particularly relevant in indigenous communities.

"There is no university like it in the world," says Jesús Ángel Ochoa, a respected Mexican anthropologist who is rector and co-founder of the institution, in this quaint farming town in northern Sinaloa state. He cites the unusual student body, 80 percent of whom are Indians from rural areas, in a country where a college education is usually a privilege of the urban elite.

"We had Indians who had never used shoes. Now they're learning to speak English," says Mr. Ochoa, with characteristic enthusiasm. The project is a response to the growing demand among indigenous groups throughout Mexico for better access to education -- from elementary school to graduate studies -- that has emerged since the 1994 Zapatista uprising, in the southern state of Chiapas.

The continuing standoff in Chiapas, in which an army of Maya Indians is pressuring the government to improve conditions for the country's 62 indigenous groups, has reinvigorated the Indians' centuries-old struggle for equality that began with the Spanish conquest of Mexico, in 1521.

"This couldn't have happened without the Zapatistas," says Gregorio Uribe, a Puré-pecha Indian who has been at the forefront of the movement for bilingual, indigenous education in Mexico. "The creation of a national university for Indian students is long overdue," he says, citing the long history of discrimination against the Indians by the country's majority mestizos, who are of mixed Spanish and Indian blood.

A Regionwide Movement

Indians throughout Latin America have begun clamoring for better access to education as part of a general indigenous-rights movement sweeping the region. Paradoxically, the success of Indian groups in achieving their goals appears to be inversely proportional to their share of the population. In countries like Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru, which have large indigenous populations, Indian groups tend to be poorly organized and literacy rates among Indians are less than half that of mestizos. But in countries where Indians make up a small minority, like Nicaragua and Belize, the government has granted indigenous groups limited autonomy over their natural resources and has actively supported education projects, including some college-level programs.

The most noteworthy of those is the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, which opened in 1995 with funds from the Nicaraguan government and international donors. The institution, which unlike its Mexican counterpart charges tuition, grew out of a demand by the region's Miskitu, Mayangna, and Rama Indians for a university-level education that would help them protect their rain-forest reserves from harmful development. The university offers degrees in resource management, fishing, and mining, as well as anthropology and teacher education. However, a college education remains a remote dream for most Nicaraguan Indians, a majority of whom never make it to high school.

'Out of Step' With Needs?

In Mexico, the government's own statistics paint a vivid picture of the Indians' marginal status. Twenty-eight percent of indigenous children never set foot in a school. Only 24 percent of Indians complete elementary school, compared with 80 percent of mestizos. Fifteen percent of Indian children finish middle school. But so few complete high school or college that the government does not even keep track.

"The fact that Indians live overwhelmingly in poor, remote areas and are subject to discrimination is the perverse inheritance of the colonial era," says Lourdes Cacillas, an education reformer who is in charge of higher education for the federal government's Coordinating Office for Intercultural and Bilingual Education. President Vicente Fox created the office in 2000 to address Indian demands for better access to education.

Until then, the prevailing view was that the way to improve Indians' status was to make them more like mestizos. In 1948, for example, the government formed the National Indigenous Institute to try to incorporate Indians into mainstream Mexican society. The legacy of that integrationist policy can be seen today in the decline in the number of Mexicans who speak a native Indian language, from 14 percent in 1940 to 5 percent today, according to government figures. In many cases, the Indian teachers themselves, whom the government had trained to teach in Spanish and in their native languages, instead discouraged students from speaking the Indian languages, to avoid discrimination by mestizos.

Today, among the president's many ambitious goals is tripling the number of Indian students who attend college by the time his term expires, in 2006. Success will be hard to measure, though, because the government has yet to produce figures on current enrollment.

"The Mexican system is very pre-professional, but it's out of step with the needs of Indian communities," says Ms. Cacillas, who is in charge of evaluating the roughly 20 experimental projects in indigenous higher education that have emerged since the mid-1990s, with an eye to possibly creating a federal university for indigenous students. (The Autonomous Indigenous University is essentially public, although it receives private donations.)

Despite her enthusiasm for the projects, Ms. Cacillas cautions against ones that diverge too much from traditional Western education.

"The trick is to help [the Indians] recuperate their cultures without making Indian ghettos isolated from the Western world," she says.

Origins of a University

Mr. Ochoa had that dilemma in mind more than 20 years ago, when he helped create a program in indigenous studies at the University of the West. The program sought to train a new generation of academics who could teach subjects like Indian "cosmovision," a combination of cosmology and spirituality, and ancient agronomy, as well as computer science. But the project closed several years later because of a lack of support from administrators, says Mr. Ochoa.

Then, in 1998, he and several colleagues came up with the idea of drawing on the existing anthropology institute at the University of the West to create an independent university here for indigenous students that would also be open to mestizos. The founders chose the town, which lies 800 miles northwest of Mexico City, for its history as a ceremonial center for the region's Yolem'me Mayo Indians. There were also an abundance of abandoned colonial buildings that could be bought cheaply and restored.

The first 300 students arrived here in September 1999. Most were lured by the promise of free tuition, room, and board. But even students whose own homes lacked running water were surprised by the university's bare-bones facilities.

"We thought since the school was in the north that we would have better conditions," says Pascual Vázquez, 20, a computer-science major from Palenque, a Maya town in the jungle region of Chiapas. "It was quite a surprise."

He and other third-year students tell how they slept on the floor of an abandoned cotton-processing factory for several months while the university's directors scrounged for money to buy tents. Meals -- consisting of beans, watery soup, and tortillas -- were served on tables set up alongside a cornfield. And many of the campus buildings, mostly 300-year-old colonial houses that had been abandoned for decades, were on the verge of collapse.

Mr. Ochoa took two years to win state recognition for the project and, more important, modest state financing. The university operates on a \$400,000 budget per trimester, although its directors say they need that amount every month to meet basic operating costs. Staff members often go weeks without pay, and the directors are waiting for \$3.7-million they say was pledged by federal-government officials last year. The money is needed for a new dormitory for male students, who now sleep in military-style rows of bunk beds under the pitched metal roof of the cotton factory. The female students are slightly better off, living eight to a room in a sagging concrete building near the town square.

Unconventional Studies

Still, the rough living conditions have not deterred the flood of students seeking admission. All applicants are admitted, until the university reaches its stated capacity of 3,000. The only admission requirement is a high-school diploma, with preference given to students from indigenous communities.

Today, 2,400 students from 29 indigenous groups in Mexico and Central America are enrolled, and the directors have plans to open admission to 100 more indigenous students from throughout Latin America. The university offers bachelor's degrees in 11 areas, ranging from standard fields like computer engineering to innovative programs tailored to the needs of indigenous communities, such as ethnopsychology and rural sociology.

In part because of a dearth of professors qualified to teach those subjects, the directors opted for a system in which students receive syllabuses at the beginning of each trimester and are expected to research the topics on their own, using the 17,000-book library and the Internet. The one resource not lacking at the university is computers, nearly 500 of which were donated by a Mexican computer manufacturer. When students have questions, they turn to the university's 50 academic advisers.

Sixty percent of the advisers are from indigenous communities, and all are enrolled in one of three master's programs -- social education, business and economics, and marketing -- offered at a separate campus, in Los Mochis, 12 miles away. The system has the money-saving advantage of requiring fewer professors and classrooms, while allowing students to explore particular areas of interest. But for many students, the unconventional teaching method and curriculum make for a tough adjustment.

"At first, we had no idea how to do research -- we were afraid," says Minerva López, 19, a Zoque-speaking Maya Indian from Chiapas. "Here, if you have a question, you have to answer it for yourself. But it has forced us to work in teams." Like other students, Ms. López, a first-year sociology major, says economic constraints were the deciding factor in choosing the university.

"If it weren't for the money, I'd stay in Chiapas," she says, explaining that her farmer father could not dream of paying the \$1,500 a year she estimates it would cost to attend the state university, assuming she could pass the rigorous admission tests. "He is just happy that I can study," says Ms.

López, who is the sixth of 11 children and the only one to make it to college. "He doesn't want me to have the life he had."

About a third of the students come from strife-torn Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state. Half come from Yolem'me-speaking communities in the mountains of northern Sinaloa and southern Sonora state, or from mestizo towns nearby. Fifteen Mayangna Indian students from Nicaragua's Caribbean coast arrived in the fall.

Mr. Ochoa, whose work among the Mayo people of Sinaloa earned him Mexico's top anthropology prize, says the university's unconventional study plan is more in keeping with Indian traditions. "Education in indigenous communities is direct and parallel, by means of the oral tradition," he says. "The walls fall away. There are no barriers between the students and the teachers."

Many students, however, question whether there is anything innately indigenous about the system. "I think anthropologists absorb the shell instead of seeing the heart of what's going on -- it's a superficial understanding," says Ignacio Patrón González, 32, a Nicaraguan who is getting a master's degree in business and economics. "I don't think this [method] is the answer. I think it's an experimental idea, but it doesn't have any basis in indigenous culture." Other students say the system was chosen more for its low cost than its effectiveness.

Low Dropout Rates

Emmanuel Vázquez is a 17-year-old journalism major from El Limar, a village in the central highlands of Chiapas that has been battered by fighting between the Zapatista rebels and the army. He says he hoped to escape the strife by studying here, hundreds of miles away. But he now regrets that decision.

"Without teachers, I don't learn," he says. "I get bored just reading all the time." While such complaints are not uncommon, most students appear willing to give the program a chance. Dropout rates after the first year are a mere 5 percent, according to Mr. Ochoa and other academics familiar with the program.

"This is very impressive, considering they are indigenous students and come from very isolated regions," says Guillermo Espinosa Velasco, a former head of the government's National Indigenous Institute, the agency that has pushed to incorporate Indians into mainstream society but has been accused of destroying Indian culture instead.

"There were so many teachers who didn't want to have anything to do with their communities," says Mr. Uribe, the Purépecha education activist. "They were embarrassed and ashamed. Our own indigenous teachers have been perpetrating a kind of ethnocide."

An 'Excellent Jumping-Off Point'

But those attitudes began to change in the early 1990s, activists say, with the cultural reawakening spurred by the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World. While many

governments in the Americas and Spain celebrated the event, indigenous groups staged vast protests against the ethnocide they said had been conducted by the Spanish colonizers. Many of the most active Indian-rights groups were formed in 1992.

Starting in 1994, the government began building scores of new elementary schools in indigenous communities and disbursed thousands of stipends and scholarships for Indian students. But it could take several decades before those measures raise the college-going rates of Indian students.

In the meantime, many involved in Indian education look to the Autonomous Indigenous University to pave the way. "The model needs tweaking, but it is a very excellent jumping-off point," says Mr. Espinosa.

Mr. Ochoa acknowledges that the program is still at an early stage. The university will be complete, he thinks, only when Indian graduates are running it. Referring to a traditional Indian festival, he says, "We have to train them to be Mexicans who can dance the Guelaguetza and go to the moon. Who says they can't do both?"

<http://chronicle.com> Section: International Volume 49, Issue 20, Page A38

******Derechos de autor: The Chronicle of Higher Education. Queda prohibida la reproducción de este contenido, sin el permiso del periódico.**