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From Humble Beginnings, a Humanist Global Mission

The U. of Monterrey strives to be a top private college, but its academic rigor is questioned

By MARION LLOYD

In a country where only 1 percent of college students can afford to study abroad, staking your university's reputation on its international program might seem elitist.

In a way, it is. But the University of Monterrey, where 40 percent of students participate in foreign-exchange programs, says that internationalization is also part of a broader commitment to helping the world's poor.

The university, in the canyon-flanked foothills of Mexico's industrial capital here, was founded in 1969 by four Roman Catholic orders. From the start, they included community service among the core requirements, and the university now runs dozens of social programs in poor areas of Mexico.

The founders' goal was to create a competitive private institution with a humanist mission and a liberal-arts curriculum, an oddity in Mexico, where most colleges prepare students for specific careers.

That ambition does not come cheaply. At \$8,000 a year, tuition at the University of Monterrey is among the highest in Mexico, with optional lodging for out-of-town students running an additional \$6,000 annually.

Nearly half of the university's 8,500 undergraduates receive student aid, scholarships they can use toward study-abroad programs. The university, known as UDEM, its Spanish acronym, also provides grants to top students to offset the costs of studying in the United States or Europe.

"From the beginning, the idea was to be open and tolerant and to expose students to different perspectives," says Francisco Azcúnaga, the university's rector of 15 years. "Our international program is a logical extension of that philosophy."

Under Mr. Azcúnaga's tenure, the university has gone from being a bit player on the Mexican internationalization scene to a global model. Since opening its first international office in 1997, the University of Monterrey has risen to become the national study-abroad leader, with a goal to have half of its students participating in global activities within a few years.

Advertising Gimmick?

It also offers a wide range of international options at home, including classes taught by foreign professors and the country's first undergraduate major in international affairs. To graduate from UDEM, all undergraduates must achieve a score of 550 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the minimum score required by most U.S. master's degree programs.

The university is also a leader in attracting foreign students, who make up 5 percent of the student body, compared with the national average of 0.15 percent. Only the University of the Americas at Puebla and the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Superior Studies, both institutions with long histories of internationalization, have larger shares of foreign students.

But some Mexican academics question whether the size of a university's foreign-exchange program is really the best indicator of its degree of internationalization.

Imanol Ordorika, a higher-education researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, or UNAM, argues that a better measure is the number of articles published in international scientific journals. While the National Autonomous University had 2,700 such articles published last year, the University of Monterrey had one.

"Their so-called internationalization is an advertising gimmick, to take advantage of their proximity to the [U.S.] border," he argues. Monterrey, with 3.5 million residents, is Mexico's third largest city, just 140 miles south of Laredo, Tex.

Mr. Azcúnaga acknowledges that his university lags in scholarly research. But he defends UDEM's internationalization push, saying "it's definitely not a gimmick. It's a real effort."

The strategy is at the core of the university's ambitious goal to become one of the top five private universities in Latin America. The University of Monterrey has ranked anywhere from sixth to 16th place in recent national ratings by El Universal newspaper and Reader's Digest Mexico, the closest thing Mexico has to a national ranking system.

Starting in 2005, administrators at Monterrey began an exhaustive analysis of the degree of internationalization in every aspect of campus life. They then made a strategic plan, with hundreds of goals to be achieved by 2020, such as international accreditation, double-degree options for all majors, multilingual signage on the campus, and a world-class design institute, designed by the architect Tadao Ando.

"If you intend to internationalize all the processes of the university, you need a long-term strategy," says Guadalupe Ramos, vice president for student affairs, in an interview in the university's gleaming glass and concrete administration building. "Fortunately, our president is a real visionary."

Mr. Azcúnaga, however, confesses that he was not initially a believer in internationalization.

"I thought we should concentrate on improving the academic quality," he says, explaining that in the mid-1990s only 13 percent of the university's faculty held Ph.D.'s. But in his push to attract more top scholars, Mr. Azcúnaga, who holds a master's degree from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, soon ran up against a shortage of qualified candidates in Mexico. The country has 13 Ph.D.'s for every one million inhabitants, compared with nearly 300 per million in the United States, according to a University of Monterrey official.

At the same time, other private universities in Mexico — including UDEM's archrival, the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Superior Studies — were seizing on internationalization as a means to set themselves apart.

"We saw that among the Mexican universities with aspirations of being among the best, there was a lot of international exchange going on," Mr. Azcúnaga says. "But we didn't just want to have an international program. We wanted it to be great."

So in 2004, he sent Ms. Ramos and other administrators on a tour of top American and European universities to learn about their international programs. Among the search team's immediate goals was to find out how to create Mexico's second residential college, where faculty members and students live in the same complex. (The first is at the University of the Americas at Puebla, which was founded by U.S. expatriates.)

The Monterrey team interviewed some 80 deans and administrators at elite universities, including Harvard, Yale, and Berkeley. Two years later they invited 10 of them to serve on an international advisory board.

The board, which says it is the first of its kind at a Mexican university, is also unusual for the degree of involvement of its members, who are advising the institution on student leadership, social service, and internationalization.

"It's not that the UDEM is telling these people what they're doing, or asking for their stamp of approval," says Jane Edwards, associate dean of international affairs at Yale University and a member of the UDEM advisory board. Instead, she says, "they're saying 'we're grappling with various problems. How might you do this on your home campus, and what is your advice on how we might deal with this here?'"

500 hours of Community Service

Jonathan Poullard, dean of students at Berkeley and another member of the board, was impressed with the university's heavy emphasis on service learning. A team of 30 staff members closely supervises students during their 500 hours of community service, a requirement in Mexico that few universities enforce. Students are also required to take two courses on global problems, as part of UDEM's efforts to instill a social conscience among its graduates.

"They're really trying to train future leaders of that country," says Mr. Poullard, "and a part of that is that they have got to understand their connection to the broader world."

The university offers students the opportunity to study at some 600 universities on five continents. When no formal exchange agreement exists — as in the case of some Latin American countries — its advisers help students create tailor-made programs.

Enrique del Castillo, a recent graduate in international studies, took advantage of such an arrangement to attend Pontificia Javeriana University, in Colombia.

"While Colombia is part of Latin America, they have a totally different way of seeing things," says Mr. Del Castillo, who parlayed his experience into a job as a coordinator of community service at another university in Monterrey. "We think our society is the center of the world, and this helps you to get a broader perspective and avoid prejudices."

Laura Reyna, another international-studies major, spent two summers traveling and working in the United States, France, and Belgium through UDEM programs. "The university has this philosophy that if you have a goal, they'll help you achieve it," says Ms. Reyna, whose dream is to serve in the Mexican Senate. Her summer internship at the Mexican Embassy in Washington helped her land a part-time job with the Senate's international commission.

The university also sponsors work-study programs in Poland, China, and Japan. And starting next January, it will send six engineering students on a two-year exchange program at Nagaoka University of Technology, in Japan. The students, who spend their first two and a half years studying Japanese at the Mexican university, will earn dual degrees while preparing to work in Japanese-owned industries in Monterrey.

Other students have gone to Africa on two-month Catholic missionary programs, living among local villagers while teaching in rural schools.

One participant, Moraima Lizbeth Martín, chose to extend her volunteer work in Africa for a full year, using her experience as an international-finance major at UDEM to teach business to Luhya tribespeople in Kenya. She is now writing her senior thesis on microcredit for the poor.

"It's something that has marked us for life," she says of the experience, while gazing out at the Western Sierra Madre mountains that loom beyond the campus. "It not only instills a commitment to Africa, but also to our own people in Mexico."

