

From Our Members

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Studying Abroad with Alianza Bienestar Comunitario (Alliance for Community Wellness): A Year-long Cross-cultural Collaborative Research Internship

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Teaching research methods used in psychology is fraught with challenges. Most courses are limited to one term and not integrated with teaching statistics. Also, few courses focus on one problem relevant to the students for the entire course, and tend to be divorced from important lessons about cross-cultural research or research involving US American cultural groups. We addressed these limitations by building a research experience around collaboration with students in Mexico, and enhanced the experience with short study-abroad and service components. Alianza Bienestar Comunitario was a collaborative year-long undergraduate research internship that included two short study-abroad components. Program objectives included developing skills in a second language and research skills, professional development, technologies used for research, social norms marketing using social media, backtranslation, and research ethics. Students analyzed US drug use data collected by the program director and a student participant, and used this to inform a social norms marketing campaign conducted at the end of the year using social media and a website. The team included students who traveled, students who participated only in the virtual meetings, and one faculty mentor from each of four partner institutions. Partner institutions included universities in San Antonio, a public and private university in Mexico, and the Instituto Nacional de Psiquiatría Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz, Mexico's premier research and treatment hospital.

Structure and Funding

U.S. and Mexican student participants met virtually each week for 90 minutes of class for a year to understand the various patterns of drug use, learning about cultural differences and similarities between the U.S. and Mexico. After conducting data analyses with US data and reviewing the literature, Mexican students spent their spring break week in the U.S. and gave research presentations as part of a department colloquium. The year culminated in a second three-week visit to Mexico City where US students met and lived with their Mexican classmates at the institute of psychiatry where they conducted a health promotion campaign via social media. Students learned from the psychologists at the institute about the epidemic

of drugs in both the U.S. and Mexico. Students reviewed the psychologist's research, and discussed the results as these might influence their social media campaign. Armando noted, "It was a unique experience to have an entire study explained in person by a contributor to the research" and was impressed that institute investigators were developing prevention programs based on their epidemiological studies. Finally, the program also included a substantial service component where student participants visited local community organizations to volunteer and serve alongside organization staff.

Funding this type of experience is challenging but not impossible. Combining study-abroad with a research experience and service component allowed students to access more varied sources of funding. We relied on funding through 100K Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund which funds study-abroad in Latin America. This was a great source of funding because it funded the Latin American nationals' travel as well as the US American students' travel. Additional funding was obtained for the students through sources that provided research support (e.g., the psychology department budget and our Office of Research and Graduate Studies; Psi Chi scholarships are another possible source of support). Cost-sharing was an important way of demonstrating commitment to the program goals, and the university donated tuition for two research courses and student fees to the six Mexican student participants. This was also important because it allowed them access to the digital resources and technologies through the sponsoring U.S. university. We also partnered with the Lewis Center of the Americas and they provided travel funding for one of the student participants who was an alumni and no longer eligible for student funding.

Program Highlights

In April, we had our first study-abroad experience and our students from Mexico traveled to our San Antonio campus for a week visit. During this week of their spring break, they continued working on analyzing survey responses and developing a talk that they later presented in English, their nondominant language, as part of their participation in the UIW Psychology Department Colloquium. The colloquium also included a keynote speaker who offered students feedback and we livestreamed via Zoom for students in Mexico. Students who were not able to travel could also present virtually. Apart from continuing their research and attending classes, the students were able to explore San Antonio as well as tour and volunteer at local service organizations that featured mental health service models different from those in Mexico. These included supported housing for mothers in recovery and their children, and volunteering at the local clubhouse.

At year's end, students worked Monday through Thursday at the institute for three weeks. Friday through Sunday was free for cultural excursions and to explore the city, with weekends reserved for cultural excursions. They worked together in multiple groups on various tasks, but all centered on understanding US and Mexico patterns of drug use to inform the health promotion effort such as discussing journal articles (in both languages), creating bilingual content for the social media health promotion campaign, and attending

presentations given by INP investigators and other local investigators. Since young adults were offered free registration for NAMI's annual conference, the students attended an online presentation to discuss other peer health promotion efforts. Students toured the neuroscience facilities at the institute and visit with some primate researchers, and their primate subjects. Apart from 3-4 cultural excursions each week, students volunteered at a private nursing home playing *loteria* (Mexican bingo) and dominos, bringing them lunch, and hearing about their lives. They also visited two juvenile drug rehabilitation facilities and learned how their systems worked. They engaged with patients, taking part in their daily activities. Students also participated in Mexico City's Pride Parade. The program allowed them to support different marginalized groups and learn about systemic issues in treatment.

Lessons Learned and Outcomes

There were many lessons learned. We found it difficult to sustain student engagement among the additional students who were solely virtual participants because they were not getting any academic credit for their participation. Although we planned to collect data in Mexico, obtaining "CEI" (their IRB) approval in Mexico was impossible to do in such a short time. Use of technology was another problem. Zoom visual requires a large amount of bandwidth and the Mexican students' connections would drop if they used their video, but we learned how to videorecord in advance. Finding lodging that would allow for student interaction and tracking the meal budget was challenging. We hadn't budgeted for any economic inflation. COVID presented crazy challenges between obtaining WHO-approved vaccines and getting tested before travel. Another COVID complication was that visa appointments took months to obtain, and few tourist visas were being issued so we requested business visas for the Mexican students to attend a "conference." Finally, trying to work in both pesos and dollars made budgeting tricky, and obtaining memoranda of understanding to agree on scope of work and fiscal responsibilities took months.

Apart from formal objectives and outcomes, students described additional benefits in their program reflection essays: A deepened understanding of one's own and another culture, new friendships, breaking stigmas around drug use and people with addictions, strengthening academics and expanding knowledge beyond one's own country, and time management and teamwork. Mario noted that "presenting in another country and in another language is something that without a doubt I will remember for the rest of my life." When Leo began the course, "the truth is that I did not know if I was at the level of my colleagues, as I could see [their] enormous capacity." However, "as the sessions went by, I felt more confident, and it even gave me skills that are very important for any psychologist, such as the use of the SPSS program." Ana Carla observed that the visit to the women's program "helped me to be able to see a way of working, which at least I had not had the experience of seeing here in Mexico and I consider it to be an incredible way of helping people." Students

noted the transformational nature of this experience. Vale put it succinctly, “I grew up, I got to know new places, new people, I got to learn from them, ... I challenged myself, I practiced my second language, I just changed.”

The research course required two years to plan and execute, but it established a unique vehicle for cross-cultural health promotion and networking, research training, and professional development. Students obtained jobs through their new faculty connections, and internships at the national institute of psychiatry. Other students remained working on the social media campaign. One faculty mentor was recruited as a speaker for next year’s psychology colloquium. Though exhausting to plan and implement, this research course left enduring memories and relationships, served others, and expanded students’ knowledge and skills.