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Cornell H. Menking
New Mexico State University, vacademi@lasalle.edu.co

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Programa de Acompañamiento:

A sustainable model for
the comprehensive internationalization
of higher education in Colombia

Cornell H. Menking*

For the past two years I have had the opportunity to participate in the Colombian Ministry of Education's "Programa de Acompañamiento" project (PA hereafter). The project is designed to enhance second tier universities' internationalization efforts by asking first tier Colombian universities to create a program where they work side-by-side with their less internationalized, second tier, counterparts. My contribution as an international consultant was only a small part of a much more complex strategy of peer-tutoring, vision-building, and strategic planning. During the first year I was accompanied by Ms. Jean Silk, Program Manager of the Council on Latin American & Iberian Studies at Yale University. In 2011 we visited six institutions in Bogota and were guided by the capable leadership of Mr. Giovanni Anzola at Universidad de La Salle, as well as the leadership at Universidad del Rosario and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. In 2012 we repeated the project and visited eleven institutions. This time the outside expert delegation included myself and Ms. Jean Silk, as well as Dr. Alvino E. Fantini, Professor Emeritus from the School for International Training Graduate Institute. The first tier universities remained the same, with the addition of Universidad Nacional de Colombia. I think I can speak on behalf of both Ms. Silk and Dr. Fantini when I say that our portion of the project's success is

* Ph.D., Associate Provost and Associate Professor, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, U.S.A.

due almost exclusively to the efforts of our host, collaborator, colleague, and dear friend Giovanni.

In my opinion, both years of the PA have been a very valuable and worthwhile exercise. I can also say with absolute certainty that I, as an outside consultant, have reflected and learned profoundly from the experience. We learned from the heroic and sincere efforts at the participating institutions, as well as from one another. As Dr. Fantini, Ms. Silk, and myself began to define our roles in this year's implementation of the program we realized we each had a particular strength, and each one was a complementary aspect of comprehensive internationalization: Dr. Fantini was the new addition to the team, and he added the badly needed and important dimension of intercultural learning. Ms. Silk's strength is faculty and student mobility and engagement. My own strength is comprehensive internationalization and international education administration. At the opening of each individual institutional visit I found myself explaining these three perspectives and opened up the dialogue to discussion in any of these three areas – although it is important to state that we certainly did not disagree on any particular topic, and all agreed that each dimension of internationalization is important. I also think that we all agreed that Alvaro's focus on the fundamental issue of "interculturalization" as part of internationalization was a game-changing contribution to the project. Intercultural learning, we agreed, is one of the fundamental goals of comprehensive internationalization.

At the end of the project each of us produced a comprehensive report for the PA project administrators, including both comments for individual institutions as well as comprehensive comments for the project as a whole. The purpose of this commentary is not to share those reports, which reflected our each of our strengths, but I will share my own list of key questions (see appendix).

One thing that the three of us felt strongly about at the end of this project was the need for sustained and focused follow through. It seems both regrettable and unproductive to provide critical feedback on internationalization strategies of a profound nature, and then provide no mechanisms for the participants to achieve those goals. A few examples:

- We suggested that faculty and administrators participate in international exchanges to further develop their own international perspectives, but they reply that there are no resources to do so.
- We suggested that the institutions deepen their understanding of intercultural learning and assessment, but they have nowhere to turn to deepen that knowledge.
- We suggested the institution develop alternative pedagogical strategies to incorporate experiential learning methods, but they are not given an opportunity to participate in such seminars.

Despite those opportunities for strengthening the program, it is highly commendable that the Colombian government has invested resources into a wonderful self-study project. The PA has many similarities with the American Council on Education's (ACE) Internationalization Collaborative in the United States. In the ACE model, which is considered a best practice strategy for U.S. colleges and universities just beginning to internationalize their institutions, colleges and universities in similar stages of internationalization work together to share self-studies and develop internationalization strategic plans. The work of the ACE model's participants is guided by the experience of seasoned professionals affiliated with ACE, as well as other outside professionals.

But there are some important and notable differences between the efforts in Colombia and those in the United States. In the U.S. there are tremendous resources for those universities to turn to – workshops, literature in their native language (English), professional organizations with sub-groups devoted to internationalization, etc. In Colombia there are very few of those kinds of resources. Another difference is the collaborative role between the Colombian government and Colombian universities in promoting such initiatives. The Ministry of Education's internationalization office is doing an excellent job of identifying, supporting, and empowering strong Colombian universities to lead a national effort to internationalize higher education. I strongly believe that the Colombian government is on the right track to developing the same kind of national capacity that the ACE model has begun in the U.S., yet in its own

unique way. The colleagues we have met, especially the leadership at the first tier institutions, are willing to embrace the North American model when it suits them, yet quick to innovate to suit their own, unique, Colombian context when the foreign model does not suit them.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that the Colombian government's support of the PA and other initiatives such as LACHEC (Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Conference) are steps in the right direction. These initiatives are already leading to professional networks that are beginning to develop resources that are trickling down to institutions hungry for this information. Eventually, those institutions themselves will then assume responsibility for advancing the cause of internationalization of higher education in Colombia, thereby allowing the Colombian government to step back and enjoy the satisfaction of knowing they initiated a sustainable model.

Appendix

- I. Key Internationalization Questions:
 - a) Why is internationalization important to my institution
 - b) What would be unique about internationalization at my institution?
 - c) To what core institutional value does internationalization contribute?
 - d) What can be done to increase global learning at the curricular and co-curricular levels?
 - e) Do our policies and procedures promote and facilitate international activity at all levels (among administration, faculty, and students)?
 - f) How well do institutional initiatives related to global learning relate to initiatives in specific disciplines?
 - g) What recommendations can we make to our institution's leadership?

2. Presidents are encouraged publicly clarify and support the role of internationalization at the institution.
3. International Committee:
 - a) Consider forming an international committee of some kind to begin institutionalizing global learning and international activities and infuse this mentality into the ethos of the students, faculty, and staff of their respective institutions.
 - b) Name faculty to the committee – representatives from each college (facultad).
4. Start a database, or an “inventory”, of each faculty member’s strengths and interests.
5. Encourage faculty engagement in international issues:
 - a) Provide incentives for faculty to engage internationally.
 - b) The Director of the international office should get to know each and every faculty member, if at all possible.
 - c) Hire internationally engaged people.
 - d) Evaluate faculty on international engagement.
 - e) Ask faculty to organize internationally oriented seminars.
 - f) Reward international work in promotion & tenure.
 - g) Remove obstacles & disincentives.
 - h) Put faculty on an international committee.

6. Education Abroad
 - a) Choose partnerships that make sense and are good matches for your institution.
 - b) Utilize returned students to interact with future study abroad candidates.
 - c) Develop traditional exchange partnerships whenever possible and develop non-traditional "ratio agreements" to help students of few resources to participate (see below).
7. Create core required courses that connect to global/international/inter-cultural education themes and issues. Make the courses interdisciplinary, include out-of-the-classroom intercultural activities, and ask faculty from all disciplines to work together to create and deliver these courses jointly. International education is inherently interdisciplinary and asking faculty to work together and integrate their disciplines into a single themed course will reinforce that type of thinking at the institutional level.