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## Latin America Hopes to Lift Global Profile

**Chilean universities lead the way; others in region struggle against budgets and bureaucracy**



Lorenzo Moscia for The Chronicle

Students from Mexico and Ecuador attend a master's-degree program in international law at the U. of Chile, part of a joint-degree partnership with American U.

By Marion Lloyd  
Mexico City

In 2008, when much of the world was deep in recession, Chile was rolling in revenue from its copper mines. Rather than invest the windfall at home, however, the government did a surprising thing: It set aside \$6-billion to pay for Chileans to earn graduate degrees abroad.

The decision, which education experts say is by far the largest per capita investment in study-abroad scholarships by a Latin American government, was rooted in the belief that the country's future depends on its development of human capital.

Chile, with a population of just 17 million people, is also spending tens of millions of dollars on improving its state universities and developing programs in the humanities, arts, and social sciences—in part in a bid to attract foreign students and professors.

Such a unified internationalization strategy is an anomaly in a region that accounts for just 6 percent of globally mobile students, according to 2007 statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

However, Latin America's top universities—concentrated in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico—are increasingly embracing globalization in ways that go beyond the traditional model of undergraduate student exchange. And universities in the United States that want international partnerships are increasingly taking the best Latin American institutions seriously.

Chile, in particular, has made internationalization of its universities a priority. Since its former president, Michelle Bachelet, unveiled the Bicentennial Fund for Human Capital Development, in May 2008, more than 5,000 Chilean graduate students have won grants to study at elite foreign universities.

President Bachelet's administration, which left office in March, also signed academic-exchange agreements with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and the State of California, which include language training and special visas for Chilean students and researchers.

The country's goal is to finance 30,000 graduate students by 2018, the 200th anniversary of Chile's independence from Spain.

"Their focus is quite explicit: The entire education agenda is centered on boosting the competitiveness of Chile," says Francisco Marmolejo, executive director of the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration, or Conahec, which is based at the University of Arizona.

He noted that Chile's scholarship program gives preference to students pursuing subjects relevant to the Chilean economy, like engineering, agriculture, health, and environmental sciences. In addition, the country's export-promotion agency, ProChile, recently included institutions of higher education among the "products" it markets abroad.

This week university presidents and administrators from throughout the Americas are gathering in Houston to discuss ways to expand their international partnerships. The conference, sponsored by Conahec, will focus on consortium building as a way to surmount the global economic crisis. New models include research collaborations among institutions and joint graduate programs in areas like business, law, and accounting.

The conference will also examine obstacles to internationalization in the Americas—and there are many. Barriers include the stifling bureaucracy at public universities in Latin America, which conduct the vast majority of the academic research in those countries; the poor quality of most private and many public universities in the region; the absence of a common credit system throughout the Americas; and the shortage of scholarships for Latin American students to go abroad.

### **No Common Language**

Most notable, though, is the lack of foreign-language skills on both sides of the Rio Grande.

"In Mexico, the level of foreign-language teaching is horrendous," says Sylvie Didou, a Mexico-based higher-education expert and a member of a Unesco task force on education quality. "If we don't address the problem of language instruction starting in elementary school, or at least from the middle-school level, we're never going to achieve a level of mobility necessary for internationalization."

In 2008 the Mexican government announced plans to introduce English-language instruction starting in kindergarten. But the government must first overcome the severe shortage of qualified language teachers—a common problem throughout Latin America.

In Chile, there are not enough qualified English speakers to take advantage of spots in U.S. graduate programs, says Jorge Rojas, a Chilean native who is director of the Chile-California partnership program at the University of California at Davis. He notes that it will take years before a Chilean government language-immersion campaign pays off.

The program, known as Languages Open Doors, began in 2003 with intensive training in English as a second language for instructors in public and private schools nationwide, as well as exchange programs for students.

The government has since added French, German, and Mandarin Chinese to the offerings, in hopes of further preparing its students for the globalized workplace.

Security in Latin America is another major concern, particularly in Mexico, which is embroiled in an escalating drug war.

After the U.S. State Department warned in March against unnecessary travel to three northern Mexican states, a handful of American universities—including Michigan State University, the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, and the University of Texas at Austin—announced they were [suspending their programs](#) in the northern city of Monterrey.

Another challenge is the lack of a regional driver for internationalization, such as the European Union's Bologna Accord. The European Union is working with Latin American universities to develop a common credit system in hopes of boosting regional and, eventually, international academic mobility.

The Federal University of Latin American Integration, or Unila, is a step in that direction. The university, which opened in August in the Brazilian state of Paraná, near the border with Argentina and Paraguay, plans to eventually admit 10,000 students and hire some 500 professors from throughout the region.

### **Limited Activity**

However, it may be years before scholars outside Latin America—and particularly from the United States—view the region as an attractive option, administrators say.

"Europe has always been much more open" to academic exchange with Latin America, says Nuria Alsina, director of international affairs at the private Catholic University of Chile.

Catholic University enrolls among the largest numbers of foreign-exchange students of any Latin American university—some 1,300 a year, half of them from the United States. It also offers three joint graduate programs with universities in the United States.

However, Ms. Alsina says, forging partnerships with American institutions "has always been much more difficult."

Still, there are some notable exceptions.

In 2008, California's University of the Pacific became the first American college to sign a student- and faculty-exchange agreement with the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean, the region's largest association of higher-education institutions. The pact gives Pacific access to about 150 member universities in 20 countries, according to the university's Web site.

In addition, at least four other American universities—Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma State, and Kentucky—have dedicated offices for Latin America, Mr. Marmolejo says.

New York's LaGuardia Community College is providing technical assistance for a big project in the region. Starting in late April, Chile will open its first two-year college, with campuses in Santiago and in the northern mining city of Antofagasta.

The program offers degrees in areas such as civil engineering, computer science, and accounting.

### **Equal Partners**

The new collaborations reflect a major change in the way U.S. universities are viewing the top public and private universities in Latin America. They no longer treat them as beneficiaries of their expertise, but rather as equal partners in mutually advantageous relationships.

"We're looking at peer institutions, with the same level of research and educational programs," says Joel Harrington, associate provost for global strategy at Vanderbilt University.

He recently joined a high-level delegation to Catholic University of Chile to explore adding the institution to an elite group of research-based "strategic partners," whose members include Fudan University, in Shanghai, and the Universities of Cape Town, Melbourne, and Sao Paulo.

"If you really are interested in a long-term, sustainable relationship, it has to be founded on mutual respect and a long-term commitment," says Mr. Harrington.

Ms. Bachelet, Chile's first female president, emphasized the new, equal footing between American and Latin American universities while signing several research agreements with the State of California and the University of California system in 2008. "In contrast to the 1960s and 1990s, we have not come here to ask for aid," she told a packed auditorium at the University of California at Berkeley. "We have come to form an association between Chile and California as part of a new relationship."

Already, the number of Davis researchers traveling to Chile each year has jumped from five to 20, and the number of Chilean graduate students studying in California has multiplied from three to 19, says Mr. Rojas. The faculty there will be involved in helping Chile develop a half-dozen new agricultural and environmental research centers, he said.

The University of Colorado at Boulder is also teaming up with Catholic University to offer a joint Ph.D. program in engineering, a field whose rigid curriculum has traditionally deterred students from going abroad.

Meanwhile, American University's Washington College of Law is offering a joint master's program in international contract and business law at the public University of Chile, also in Santiago. The program's directors are also exploring the possibility of adding a second track for American students that would include a focus on Latin American law.

"Every year, there is more interest among American attorneys in getting trained in foreign law," says Macarena Saez, who coordinates the five-year-old program from Washington. "That's something that you really didn't see 20, 30 years ago, where attorneys were really looking within the country and seeing how

they would get jobs. Today they see the likelihood of having foreign clients is pretty high, and the likelihood of having to travel is pretty high."

### **Getting Ahead**

That same logic is fueling a growth in dual-degree programs in Mexico, particularly in the capital, which so far remains removed from the drug violence. The private Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico, in Mexico City, has four joint master's programs, including one in international accounting with Florida International University.

At an average of \$25,000 for a two-year degree, the programs are pricey by Latin American standards. But for the 19 students enrolled in the Florida program, the opportunity to earn degrees in two countries, as well as to prepare for the U.S. Certified Public Accountant license, is worth the cost. The program also teaches students about the new international accounting standards, which may become universal within a few years. "I was very impressed that they were teaching us all three systems," says Irina Nikolaeva, a Russian student who holds an accounting degree from Northeastern Illinois University, in Chicago. "That's the basic idea of globalization, that you learn how the whole world works."

Ms. Nikolaeva, who works as an accountant for the international firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, said the dual degree would help her get ahead in her job. "Of course people who know not only English, but also different accounting systems, will get promotions and higher salaries," she said.

Humberto Ahuactzin, another student, commutes two hours to the program from the city of Puebla. He says he hopes to apply his new knowledge of North American accounting methods to help professionalize Mexican companies. "In Mexico, we're working to have a modern accounting language, but we have illiterate companies," he says. "That's no way to get ahead as a country."

### **Challenges to Overcome**

Despite the appeal of such dual-degree programs, getting them off the ground is not easy.

In 2007, Oklahoma State University began offering 23 different joint master's degrees with the private Popular Autonomous University of Puebla, a business and accounting school two hours north of Mexico City.

In theory, the program has the added draw of providing students with a year in Oklahoma. (Most such programs in Latin America send students abroad for several weeks, if at all.) However, so far only four students have enrolled and two have already graduated, says Maria Guadalupe Fabregas, who directs the programs from an office at Oklahoma State.

"It's always hard making a name for yourself," she says. Still, there are signs of increased interest in such programs, and in academic exchange in the region in general. Of the 60 colleges and study-abroad providers in the United States that responded to a survey by Eastern Illinois University in 2009, 64 percent reported an increase in student participation in Latin America over the previous academic year.

More than half responded that the relatively low cost of studying in Latin America and the ease of access to universities in the region were the main motivating factors.

Yet the Latin American region as a whole accounts for only 15 percent of foreign students in the United States, according to the Institute of International Education.

"The situation in Latin America is very heterogeneous," says Ms. Didou, the Unesco task-force member. Only four countries in the region have increased the rate of their student mobility beyond their growth in enrollments, she says, citing a recent figures from the U.N. agency. Her conclusion: While there are more exchange programs cropping up every day in Latin America, the region "has yet to put academic mobility at the center of its higher-education agenda."