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**Growing International:
Breaking down Language Barriers and Parochialism**

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Today, universities throughout the world are facing the same major challenge with regard to their internationalization efforts and study abroad in particular - *engaging students to participate.*

In order to seek viable ways in which to change the mindset of students, and re-energize their internationalization, universities must first gain an understanding of the issues surrounding study abroad participation. For example:

- Students lack fluency in the language of the country in which the university is located; thus language barriers strongly inhibit their participation in study abroad programs (SAP).
- Lack of English proficiency becomes a problem for many students in Latin America and Asia planning to study at universities in English-speaking countries. Since students view language proficiency as a formidable barrier, universities should seek constructive ways in which to alleviate this problem, and to give students the confidence they need to actively participate in SAP.
- Even if international students have a good grasp of English, there may still be limited on their ability to study abroad, as universities in non-English speaking countries often offer a limited number of courses in English.
- Study abroad is essential for students to obtain global competencies and become global citizens. However parochialism continues to be an issue, and thus is still considered one of the main obstacles that SAP encounters.
- Universities actively involved in SAP need to be less independent of one another, and give greater attention to collaborating. Collaboration will enable institutions to learn from one another. Moreover, close working relationships will help them find common ground to motivate more students to study abroad.

Overcoming the challenges of Study Abroad Programs

1. Reduce language barriers

During my tenure as President of the main campus of Tecnológico de Monterrey from 2001 to 2010, I became an advocate for the revitalization of SAP. My objective was based on the fact that if we wanted to internationalize students through participation in SAP, then it was essential to make languages a top priority.

Although my objective was sound, it met resistance due to the fact that many people were under the assumption that most undergraduate students in Latin America are fluent in English and therefore do not need to study English.

However, many students find it difficult to speak, listen, read and communicate effectively when living, studying or working abroad. In fact, at least one third of Mexican undergraduate students have problems overcoming the language barrier in other countries. Hence, it is easy to understand why only an estimated 15% of the student population at the Monterrey Campus (17,000 undergraduate students) participated in SAP in 2001.

The Monterrey Campus is a good example of the general situation in Latin America. The majority of full-time students are not from the greater Monterrey area; indeed, they attended more than 300 different high schools in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Furthermore, their level of English proficiency varies widely – as a result of their region of origin and school type.

As a case in point, students from the northern states of Mexico (bordering with the United States) are more proficient in English than those coming from other areas of the country and regions in Latin America. Students graduating from bilingual high schools have levels similar to English-native speakers, whereas the English level in students belonging to traditional high schools varies.

In order to improve proficiency in English we asked all undergraduate students to take the TOEFL TEST, and obtain a minimum score of 550 in the paper-based test (PBT) before graduation (PBT scores range between 310 and 677). At the time, an estimated two thirds of the graduating class were achieving this score.

It took a few years to see the results, but by 2007 all new graduates achieved the minimum score and nearly 20% learned a third language, such as German, French, Italian, Mandarin, Japanese, and others. The English proficiency of the Monterrey Campus students was perhaps the highest of any university in Latin America.

The impact of the TOEFL requirement was very significant, as the number of students in study abroad programs grew three-fold, from 15% to 50%. In other words, half of all students spent at least a semester abroad.

Beyond study abroad, the lack of good English skills had become a disadvantage when looking for a job after graduation or when trying to pursue a graduate degree abroad, as many universities, particularly in the United States, had the TOEFL score or similar tests, as one of their admission requirements.

The number of international graduate students in the United States grew last year 5.7% (2011-2012) but most of these students had low or marginal English language skills¹. Eight of the top ten places of origin of graduate students to the United States were from Asia (China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and Turkey) and the other two were Canada (fifth place) and Mexico (ninth position)². None of these, with the exception of Canada are English-speaking.

2. Develop special programs for international students

Today many universities offer undergraduate courses in English, in order to allow current students to practice their English, and international students to take courses in a language they understand. A number of universities, particularly in Europe and Asia now offer courses in English; thus, students seeking to study in English can choose to go not only to English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, but to other countries too. Latin American universities have recently started to incorporate English courses in their undergraduate programs in order to attract international students.

Many universities also offer special programs to attract more international students. In the case of the Monterrey Campus, the following were very successful:

- Summer cultural programs
- Certificate programs
- Community projects and volunteer programs
- Industry Internships

During the summer, the Monterrey Campus offers special programs in which international students can take undergraduate courses, learn Spanish, and travel to visit and learn about Mexican ancient cultures. The most typical is the Mayan Route Summer Program visiting the states of Chiapas and Yucatán in Southern Mexico.

Certificate programs are also offered during regular semesters, in areas such as: International Business, International Trade and Legal Transactions, Latin American Studies, Tourism, and Sustainable Development. Students received at the end a Diploma in the area in which they participated.

¹ University World News, 2013

² Institute for International Education-Open Doors Report 2012

Community projects and volunteer programs were organized jointly with universities or organizations from other countries. As an example, in March 2010 a group of 65 students from Yale University participated in social and urban development projects for a community located in the greater Monterrey area.

Internships in partnership with local industry are available for international students. Here, students spend the winter semester doing course work at the Monterrey Campus, and during the summer months, the student continues working doing an internship in a Mexican company. Similar programs exist in the United States supported by organizations such as the World Association for Cooperative & Work-Integrated Education (WACE) and in Germany by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Due to all these special programs, the international student population of undergraduates at the Monterrey Campus grew four-fold, from 1% to approximately 4% from 2001 to 2010. The growth and importance of international students at the Monterrey Campus proved to be dynamic:

- Students were from more than 200 universities in 54 different countries across five continents.
- The majority of these international students were from non-English speaking countries.
- Germany, France, and the Scandinavian countries comprised the largest concentration.
- China and other Asian countries grew at a steady pace; albeit slower than the countries referenced above.
- Students from English-speaking countries also increased, particularly from Australia, the United States and Canada.
- The Monterrey Campus's goal to breakdown the language barrier, created an international community from more than fifty countries in just a few years.
- Even though English was the common language for the community, we kept encouraging students to learn other languages.

In my daily contact with international students, one of my objectives was to encourage them to not give up - even if they were not proficient in Spanish. Students should not limit their international experience because they are not fluent. We should encourage them to leave their university and their country for at least a semester and experience what the world is like.

An international community on the campus also makes students more aware of their role as global citizens, helps them become more tolerant, and teaches them to respect diversity and other cultures.

3. Internationalization of academic programs

Once the issue of English proficiency had been addressed at the Monterrey Campus, the next challenge was the internationalization of the academic

programs. Many of our students gain the opportunity to work for companies overseas, or for Mexican multinational corporations. To ensure their success we developed the International Degree Programs (IDP) for outstanding students. These programs have English proficiency as a prerequisite and the learning of a third language as an additional requirement.

The program also required the students to spend a year in another university abroad, where many students also had the opportunity to do a summer internship in companies of the same country. Around 5% of the student population had enrolled in in these programs after just a few years. Over one hundred double degree agreements were signed with universities from United States, Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Australia, New Zealand and China.

4. Growing international in a rapidly changing world

During my ten-year tenure as President of the Monterrey Campus, I had the opportunity to observe with great interest the more than 25,000 students completing their bachelor degree in areas as varied as engineering, business, medicine, humanities, social sciences, architecture, arts and design. I can state without hesitation that most of these students can communicate very effectively in English and other languages.

These students belong to a new generation of professionals that had the opportunity to participate in international programs. As many as 10,000 of them studied abroad for six months or a full year, while also remaining part of the international community of the Monterrey Campus. An estimated 5% of the undergraduate population was enrolled in International Degree Programs, and many went on to obtain a dual or double degree abroad with a partner university.

Approximately 60% of these alumni have worked for companies located outside Mexico (one to five years) and currently around 10% work abroad. These alumni are highly regarded by international companies.

Five years following graduation, approximately 50% of alumni had obtained a graduate degree. A third of them graduated from universities outside Mexico.

The International Community that is being developed in the Monterrey Campus has contributed to make the students more aware of their role as global citizens. Also, when you create an international community, you create centers of dialogue and tolerance, where people learn to respect others and their beliefs.

Worldwide, over the past decade the number of foreign students enrolled outside their country of origin has doubled-2 million students in the year 2000 to more than 4 million in 2010. Equivalent to a 7% growth per year, this trend most likely will continue. Considering this, universities should give an increased emphasis on reinforcing their International Programs:

- Giving a higher priority to languages,
- Developing special programs for international students,

- Internationalizing academic programs to develop international qualifications and global competencies in their students,
- Sending their students into the world by promoting to a greater extent their mobility, and
- Creating international communities within their campuses.

Graduates need new skills and competencies to be able to compete for the new jobs that global economic recovery will create over the next years. In order for this to become a reality, traditional universities need to keep pace with the rapidly changing world we live and work in.