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Honors in Chile: New Engagements in the Higher Education System

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ABSTRACT

Honors programs are rare in Latin America, and in Chile they were unknown before 2003. At the Universidad Austral de Chile, an interdisciplinary group of scholars linked to environmental studies put forward a pilot project for implementing a new experience in higher education. Challenged by an educational environment where (i) apathy and mediocrity have taken over the classrooms, (ii) monodisciplinary training rules the university campus, and (iii) authoritarian teaching persists, this has been an experiment in new ways of approaching the classroom. Stimulated by experiences in the USA, a project proposal was written, finding support in the Chilean Ministry of Education. Three years of experience have proven that a Chilean honors program can serve as a model for programs elsewhere in Latin America. In the following pages we aim to provide a summary of what this experience has meant, using the most recent class as an example. Some background about the university and the Chilean system needs to be supplied, while most of the paper deals with the particular features of this program and its immediate future.

This paper describes the honors experience at the Universidad Austral de Chile (UACh). The UACh program is of interest not only because of its Latin American context, but also because it is focused on a particular theme, Environmental Studies and Sustainable Human Development. After three years, the program has just completed its pilot phase, and so the time is appropriate to describe its accomplishments and challenges.

INTRODUCTION: THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Universidad Austral de Chile, located in the southern city of Valdivia, was founded in 1954. A state-sponsored regional university, UACh is among the five leading universities in the country. A body of almost 10,000 undergraduate students is distributed in its 38 schools (*escuelas*), which fall under the university's 10 faculties (*faculdades*). The 665 professors belong to 69 institutes (*institutos*), or research/teaching units.[1]

Improving the quality of higher education has been a permanent, although not achieved, goal in the university. The low academic performance of the incoming students and their lack of motivation impede attaining this goal. Most of the UACh students belong to the lower socioeconomic brackets, and many of them come from families whose parents have never received a higher education. They graduate from public or publicly subsidized schools with extremely poor academic records. Selection in the Chilean university system operates through a national test, and students with higher scores are concentrated in the capital city of Santiago. Regional universities lag behind the Santiago universities in the students' aspirations; students see a better future if graduating from an institution where all academic and non-academic resources are concentrated.

Limitations other than the low academic skills of the students affect the university, including its provision of rigid, traditional classes that tend more to the reproduction of existing knowledge than to the acquisition of learning skills or the development of a passion for new knowledge. Non-academic factors that contribute to poor performance among students at UACh are the rainy environment and lack of recreational opportunities during the long winter period.

However, some opportunities for reversing these trends are available in the system. On the one hand, UACh has a great infrastructure, including computer labs and access to information technologies, library, and classroom facilities. The Chilean Ministry of Education is pumping new resources into the system; most of these have gone into the construction of new buildings and the renewal of equipment. A growing concern about inequities in the higher education system favors innovative initiatives that could help in finding new avenues for better prospects in the university system (Brunner et.al. 2005).

The Chilean educational system, like many in Latin America, is highly rigid. Upon finishing high school, students choose a *carera* ("career") to pursue in the university. Such careers are traditional fields of knowledge that lead to an academic degree (licentiate) and a professional title after a four-year cycle. Programs are fixed, and each cohort follows the same path. As a result, students acquire specific perspectives and tools that enable them to reproduce this knowledge. In spite of many able students and dedicated faculty, the educational environment is characterized by authoritarian teaching and by apathy

[1] The Universidad Austral de Chile offers ten Ph.D. programs, mainly in sciences and humanities, along with 21 masters programs.

and mediocrity in the classroom. Monodisciplinary training rules the university campus. Critical thinking, passionate research, meaningful learning experiences, and serendipity are, for the most part, absent in this model.

The Center for Environmental Studies (CEAM) at the Universidad Austral de Chile is a counterpoint to this structure. CEAM is a transdisciplinary space created in 2002 to bring together faculty from the natural and social sciences to study environmental problems and contribute to policy making at the national and local levels. The university has an important group of researchers from diverse fields of knowledge working on these issues. The Center for Environmental Studies was designed to be a link between the university and the community, and between research and teaching.

THE HONORS PROGRAM IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES AND HUMAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (PILOT PHASE)

The Honors Program proposal was inspired by U.S. experiences (Fuiks and Clark 2000, Long 1995, Schuman 1995). What makes the Chilean program different is that it targets a specific field of thought: environmental studies and sustainable human development. The thematic orientation of the program was no accident since it was developed by the same faculty who organized the Center for Environmental Studies.

However, beyond the program's subject matter, there was a deep concern about the quality of undergraduate studies in the university. The program was seen as an opportunity for improving teaching and for finding new ways of creating a classroom environment consistent with the needs of the student body. The underlying idea was to radiate the ideals of an experience-centered approach to learning from the Honors Program to the rest of the school. This aim was based on the notions that good work deserves to be recognized and that, if given the opportunity, students would develop academic skills that otherwise are neutralized under the pressure of a peer-conformist atmosphere.

The Honors Program was, likewise, conceived as a local contribution to the process of improving higher education at the national level. As such it was submitted for a grant from the National Ministry of Education along the lines of innovation in the academy. The local project was not only to transform the UACh undergraduate teaching system but to help other regional universities achieve similar goals.

The Honors pilot project, from the point of view of the University's strategic plan, is the most important teaching initiative of CEAM. It contributes to the aims of "transforming nature as well as knowledge" and of "searching for answers beyond the horizon"; and by providing a transdisciplinary view of environmental issues, it helps to promote a better integration of the university's resources. It also becomes a symbol of a university striving to find new avenues for improved teaching.

The Honors Program is physically as well as institutionally located in CEAM, one of four A-frame houses on the campus. Originally built as faculty housing, the Center has three stories of offices, a kitchen, and a large conference room for classes and meetings. Honors students have a place to go, and they are found in every part of "Casa 4." The picture windows of the house overlook the river that separates the campus from the center of Valdivia. Open to the city and seen from the city, Casa 4 is an apt symbol of the connection the Honors Program makes between the campus and the region.

The goal was to create a transdisciplinary learning setting for undergraduate students from all fields of knowledge, focusing on environmental studies and sustainable human development. The topic is consistent with the university's strengths, which include ecology and humanities, and with a region where native forests, biodiversity, and wildlife are undergoing increasing stress. The Honors Program pilot project was funded through a grant competition of the MECESUP Program of the Chilean Ministry of Education (MECESUP AUS 0202).

The Honors Program has operated with the following guidelines:

i. To work with an incoming cohort of twenty students, selected among the best second- and third-year applicants.

ii. To offer a seminar taught by at least three professors coming from different faculties, followed by two other seminars. After completing three seminars, students qualify for receiving the distinction of Honors on their diploma when they graduate.

iii. To include a seminar style for classes, enhanced by field activities, and participation in the classroom not only of students and faculty but also community members and experts.

iv. To consider non-traditional forms of evaluation. The program defined "academic products" as a means of summarizing the students' learning. Such products consist of a synthesis of the acquired knowledge, supported by any technical device (a Powerpoint presentation, a bulletin, a poster, a representation, or whatever other means available), open to public scrutiny.

Based on this schema, the program has already served three different cohorts from the second semester of 2003 through the second semester of 2005. One hundred forty students from 30 careers have applied to the Program, 60 of them being enrolled. Of these, more than 40% have completed the program.[2]

The program has been advertised through the university website, and a yearly recruitment process is held. Students apply on a voluntary basis,

[2] Students are recruited from the three university campuses: Miraflores and Isla Teja in Valdivia, and Puerto Montt in that city. A problem has been to sustain the Puerto Montt students' participation: they must travel for three hours each way to attend the class, and it hasn't been easy to retain them.

although they may be encouraged by faculty. The selection process involves a review of the academic background and interviews of the prospective students. Main selection criteria include: GPA; motivation as substantiated in personal experience, interviews, and references; and an even distribution of students across different fields.

The seminars that have been offered are the following:

- From Multiple to Trans: Tasting Serendipity
- Coastal Maritime Biodiversity in the Chilean South
- Theory and Solution of Problems of Conservation Biology
- Global Change
- Environmental and Cultural History of the Southern Chilean Temperate Forests
- Associative Entrepreneurship for the Sustainable Development in Rural Communities
- Water as a Means for Learning about the Ecosystem and its Sustainable Use
- Bioethics, Sustainable Development and Conservation in Natural areas in Chile
- Philosophies of Development: Epistemologies, and Biology of Knowledge

An estimated fifty-five faculty have participated in the experience, thirty-four of them coming from UACh, the rest from other universities and research centers. Among them are geologists, marine biologists, ecologists, philosophers, economists, social scientists, zoologists, and foresters. In addition, a significant number of organizers, experts, and other guests have participated in these seminars. Similarly, international visitors, mainly from the United States but also from South Africa and Brazil, have joined the experience.

PHILOSOPHIES OF DEVELOPMENT: AN ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGY

To give a more concrete idea of the pedagogical approach of the UACh Honors program, we describe the most recent seminar, "Philosophies of Development," which was taught during the second semester of 2005. The coordinator of the course was Carlos Alberto Cioce Sampaio, a Brazilian professor of development studies who was conducting a postdoctoral program at CEAM. This class was inspired by the need for working with the students to find new, alternative avenues for community development. Rather than abstract discussions of development philosophy, the course focused on the real needs of a rural community about forty-five minutes from the university campus. The community of Tralcao with its indigenous organization, Tralmapu, was chosen as the site for this experience.

The theoretical layout of the class included three modules: Epistemologies of Knowledge, Biology of Knowledge, and Cultural and Socioeconomic Change. Two hypotheses were considered (*ex ante*) that connected these modules: (1) Socioeconomy is based on new forms of social action oriented not only by a utilitarian rationality but also by a more values-based rationality rooted in local knowledge (sometimes derogatively seen as "subjective"); and (2) that subjectivity may become a means of enriching the decision-making process (Tuan 1980; Berkes 1996; Lévi-Strauss 1997; Oyarzún 1998; Varela 2003; Maturana, Varela 2001). As suggested by Max-Neef (2005), to deny subjectivity is to deny differences and the individuality of the human being.

The theme of Socioeconomy can be understood through methodologies of participatory, decentralized, and socially and environmentally responsible organizational management. This type of management has an emphasis on networks of organizations where traditional/popular knowledge is valued. This type of organization can generate ideas and proposals, under the eye of local people, that are not disengaged or distanced from the details of everyday life.

What connects the three modules in the course is the search for practical elements that help to improve the well-being of disadvantaged communities through the sustainable use of natural resources. So a principal objective was to reflect critically on models of development and to explore alternatives based on a new model, called Socioeconomy, characterized by cooperation, solidarity, and the articulation of experiences. The Socieconomy model is based on a new culture that values popular knowledge as well as academic knowledge, practical knowledge as well as theoretical, local solutions as well as external ones; that supports innovation and creativity; that seeks to recognize the characteristics that give us identity in a global context; that proposes a new university closer to the community, capable of speaking a simple language and at the same time a scientific language, proposals that are based on the biology of knowledge and human evolution. The specific objectives were to: (a) identify Chilean experiences that move in the direction of Socioeconomy, under criteria pointed out by Sampaio (2005); and (b) produce materials that can serve as a proposal for implanting Socioeconomy practices in the Tralcao Mapu Indigenous Community Project (Sampaio, Otero, Skewes 2005; Skewes, Sampaio, Egaña 2005).

The community of Tralcao had been working with the university to explore opportunities for ecotourism based largely on birdwatching. This is because Tralcao is located in the Rio Cruces Nature Sanctuary, a renowned site for migratory birds and especially known for its black-necked swans (*Cygnus melancorypha*). It is part of the municipality of San Jose de la Mariquina (Lakes Region), which is linked to the Sustainable Ecoregion Program of the Lakes Region, an initiative of the non-governmental organization Agenda 21, and supported by other units of the Universidad Austral de Chile: the Institute of Tourism, with its Diploma in Rural Tourism; the School of Anthropology through the dissertation of one of its students; and CEAM, through a post-doctoral project. Tralcao has

faced unexpected environmental stress since 2004, when the opening of a paper pulp mill upstream resulted in the disappearance of the black-necked swans. The community was faced with few alternatives.

For their class projects, the students identified diverse projects that could potentially help the community in confronting its new circumstances. At an initial visit to Tralcao, students met with community members and informed them about the plans for the class. The students organized themselves into small groups to identity successful community projects in different parts of Chile. These projects were examples of community-based local socioproductive agreements.

These agreements are micro initiatives where raw competition is bypassed by actions that privilege a horizontal network of cooperation. The idea is to add value to small businesses, increasing the survival chances for small entrepreneurs facing an encroaching market. The notion of "community-based" suggests alternative modes of production and distribution. Community cuts across gender, territoriality and poverty. This represents a local alternative for the inclusion of marginalized ("shoeless") people, stimulating policies that would avoid the high rates of bankruptcy among local initiatives, a result of unequal access to the market. In their aim to survive competition, most of these initiatives, otherwise known as informal, rely upon low wages, fraud, postponement of social security contributions and taxes, self-exploitation and even depletion of nature (Sampaio 1996; Sachs 2003; Araujo, Sampaio, Souza 2004).

The students relied upon secondary sources and interviews with experts to develop their presentations. Each week during the semester the class focused on a specific project. The student group's presentation was followed by commentaries from two experts (a scientist and a "shoeless" philosopher, a non-academic community member) and open discussion by the rest of the class. A record was kept of each session, and the learning in the discussion was meant to improve the group's project.

The final session of the class was a public presentation to the Tralcao community of the students' findings. Community members were asked to evaluate each of the projects, based on the project's presentation and a poster, considering simplicity of language, intelligibility, and pertinence and feasibility for the local organization.

Currently the community is choosing which among the demonstration projects presented by the students have the greatest possibility for replicability in the community. Institutionally, the community is trying to create the conditions for becoming an incubator of local community-based projects in the area served by UACh.

The students had the experience of looking at potential community projects, presenting their findings in a public setting directly to the people most concerned, and getting feedback not only from their peers and teachers but from the community itself.

EVALUATION

An initial evaluation of the program, based on a survey and informal interviews, suggested the following conclusions for the Pilot Phase:

i. As an overall indication of the degree of satisfaction, out of seven points, participating students evaluated the program with a 5.9 while participating faculty with a 5.7, and the chairs of the different schools with a 5.1. These averages are well above those for any *career* in the university, which rarely reach the 5.0 level.

ii. The program is acknowledged as forging the competencies which it aims for: critical thought, transdisciplinary integration, team working, practical engagement, and environmental awareness. Students perceived themselves as changed in their way of understanding and acting upon the world.

In interviews, students reported that one of the most stimulating experiences for them in the program was to see how excited the faculty members became when working with colleagues from other disciplines in the team-taught courses. Faculty members reported the same experience.

Transdisciplinary experiences, as when students in the course on Environmental and Cultural History of the Southern Chilean Temperate Forests got to work in the carbon analysis laboratory, or the community engagement of engineering students are among the most valued experiences reported by the students, who believe that such experiences have changed their way of understanding the world.

Another important component valued by students in their learning experience has been the opportunity of publicly sharing the products of their work. Each seminar has ended with a public display of the academic products achieved during the semester. The most important of these was the exhibit about Conservation, Global Change and Sustainability that was displayed in the university's Great Hall as part of the commemoration of the university's fiftieth anniversary.

iii. The physical setting of the program is an important component. This house provides students with a rare intellectual "home," which they use with enthusiasm.

A crucial point in the program's history was its evaluation by professor Bernice Braid, a former president of the NCHC, in November 2005. Professor Braid received a self-evaluation report that she had the opportunity to compare to her own findings through a field visit. Her report is eloquent in her concluding remarks:

> It is astonishing how completely this fledgling Honors Program, even in its Pilot years, has sought to embody the full range of attributes of highly successful and long running honors programs. . . .

> There is already in place a structure, a clear sense of the value of Honors in itself and for UACh, and a cadre of professionals on campus who can help to build on the foundation already established. Since this Program operates like a departmental honors program, it could well flourish on campus with other similar transdisciplinary programs. Where others developed, the model of this one should prove instructive, and all should be encouraged to work together in open houses and other forums where the general public is invited. . . . It is clear that I recommend not only that this Honors Program—Environmental Studies and Sustainable Human Development—be continued, but be used as a model for the establishment of parallel Honors opportunities if such are proposed.

Braid ends by suggesting that the experience be written about, "so that Chile, Latin America, and the world know more about how much the Program has accomplished in just three years, and how much it has to offer others for them to emulate."

CHALLENGES

Overall, the Honors experience has demonstrated its aptness for a Latin Amercan regional university such as UACh. Such is the perception not only of direct participants, but also of other community members. The experience is seen by chairs of the *escuelas* as highly innovative and groundbreaking in academia. As such it is seen as replicable in other similar universities.

The Chilean honors experience might prove to be an avenue for bridging the gap between highly competitive universities (only three in the country) and the vast majority of higher educational institutions that deal with a socially and academically vulnerable population. By offering an alternative for excellence, the Honors Program contributes an opportunity for setting new teaching and learning standards in this context.

Of great importance has been the honors students' engagement in social and academic activities through which they express an emerging leadership in environmentally relevant topics such as animal rights, environmental protection for the surrounding nature sanctuary, and participation in diverse national and international seminars.

The accomplishments of the pilot phase of the UACh Honors Program are all the more notable for the fact that both faculty and students participated in the program without credit. Students did not receive academic credit for taking the three seminars. Faculty taught the courses without any reduction in their regular teaching load. This was necessary during the pilot phase, but is not sustainable in the long run.

Currently, the program aims for its consolidation at the university. In pursuing this goal, three major difficulties have been faced:

i. To convince the administration of the value of programs such as the Honors Program as an important ingredient at the undergraduate level and more generally as a part of campus life. The recent evaluation survey showed that the Honors Program is not well known on the university campus. The project's coordinators were not well enough aware of the importance of devising a strategy to involve the university administration. (The evaluator's visit proved crucial at this point.)

ii. To convince the administration to invest in a program that appears not to produce immediate returns and that, seen from a different view, might be criticized for either dragging resources out of the *institutos* or for its elitist nature. It is thus important to demonstrate what the Honors Program can do for the university, namely:
   - Improve the quality of academic teaching
   - Attract better and more talented students
   - Project the work of the University as a regional and national leader on emerging issues.

iii. To develop real honors practices among instructors. Indeed, good professors mistakenly believe that what best qualifies them is their ability to attract students' attention rather than to make the students the true actors of the process. The experiences and approaches developed in the Honors Program can be spread to the university's regular courses.

iv. To raise class requirements among students. As a non-credit course, the Honors class was not seen by the students as a legitimate academic requirement. Thus the students' initial drive was satisfied by classes involving open discussions with few or any readings. Giving Honors courses regular credit recognized by the students' *careras* would both legitimize the program and stimulate active participation.

Such difficulties are counterbalanced by some of the program's achievements. In its first three years, the Honors Program has been able to establish itself as part of a commonsensical view of the university's activities. It has mobilized a great number of students, visitors, faculty, and community members. International students and outside researchers and faculty have spontaneously offered to join this venture.

If some of the crucial achievements of the Program ought to be underlined, the following are certain:

i. The program showed that a transdisciplinary dialogue in the classroom was not only possible but that it stimulated the formation of new associations among students, faculty, and even the community.

ii. It demonstrated the students' capabilities to push forward teamwork and to put forward their findings to their peers as well as to the larger community.

iii. It explored new forms of partnership among the university and the local communities, stimulating a more horizontal relationship between them. It also integrated community activists both from local organizations and from the professional world as key players in the classroom.

iv. The pilot project demonstrated that Honors is a real alternative for regional universities such as the Universidad Austral de Chile.

The program's next step will be an unusual experience of academic exchange with the Regional University of Blumenau in Santa Caterina, Brazil: a group of students, faculty and staff of the Universidad Austral de Chile and other invited staff of nearby universities will travel to Brazil to present the experiences of both the Honors Program and the Philosophy of Development seminar. This will be an encounter between the Chilean Honors Program and potential replicas both in Brazil and in Chile.

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