

International Service Learning: Meeting the Needs of Partner Institutions in Nicaragua

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Dr. Tellis presented the outline of Fairfield University's relationship with Universidad CentroAmericana (UCA) in Managua, Nicaragua. UCA hosts Nitlapán, a social research organization at the University. Nitlapán founded Fondo de Desarrollo Local (FDL) to conduct microfinance amongst the poor. Tellis described how the projects were developed. It is important to note the critical component that *Nitlapán* identified the projects, not Fairfield University. Engaging in Solidarity and Subsidiarity, foundational principles of Catholic Social Teaching along with the preservation of Human Dignity, we developed the projects on which our students would work. The students completed the projects during their Spring Break trips, as a practical application of the courses they had taken previously, and in International Information Systems, the course, which included an optional service trip to Nicaragua.

Mr. Arturo Grigsby, Director of Nitlapán, is a widely respected professional whose background in economics is in great demand in the country. He developed the initial plans for FDL, which is now an independent organization. However, his advice, and guidance is critical to FDL's continuing success. FDL is now the largest microfinance institution in Nicaragua. He described the need for, and the benefit of collaboration with Fairfield University. He explained how and why his organization selected the projects that they requested of Fairfield University. He explained how the students' reports were used, emphasizing the appropriateness of the final reports. In one case, Grigsby said, the receiving department acknowledged the accuracy of the students' report, but was unable to implement the suggestions for internal reasons. The second report is already in the implementation phase.

Jonas Stankovich a Fairfield University student senior with dual majors in Finance and Information Systems described the process that the students followed in developing the proposal. The student explained how the process differed from similar projects in the U.S., what the students learned, what they would do differently, and whether they would advise others to continue with such projects. He explained that at first, because we used UCA students as translators, common business phrases were not correctly translated. We later discovered that they were English majors. That evening, Jonas explained that the translators were invited to a meeting at UCA at which the Fairfield students explained some phrases, and then the translation was smoother. The students realized that Mr. Jairo Guevara's technical competence was excellent, but that he had not received adequate instructions on what the client (Ms Blanco, Head of the Accounting Department) needed. The students brought them together for a presentation. Within a short time, it was clear that Mr. Guevara would be able to save the Accounting department several hours of manual entry into an Excel spreadsheet. The students designed a report based on Ms Blanco's requirements, and Mr. Guevara was able to proceed with his SQL programming effortlessly. Jonas suggested that the cultural differences were not major, but they had to be addressed. He stressed the aspects of continuous consultation with Mr. Guevara, and the insistence that all the decision and solutions were locally developed. The students acted as facilitators, with the UCA players as the leaders. Jonas emphatically recommended that such

courses continue to be offered, since it is a rare opportunity for Fairfield students to work with clients on live business problems, and in addition, to experience the cultural considerations. He felt that the experience was important to his personal development. His discussions with other students on such trips confirmed his experience.