

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES
Study Abroad in Guanajuato – World Heritage City

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Project Overview

Studying abroad might be one of the most beneficial experiences for a student. There are many ways in which one can conduct such a journey and in a collaborative effort with Professor Luis Gonzalo Portugal we have designed a program focused on strengthening the Washington State/Guanajuato State communities by putting in contact our students with Mexican families. As a Latin American professor, I have been trying different ways to connect myself with the very broad Washington State community and the Community Engagement Fellow Program at Western Washington University has given me the opportunity to receive feedback about different paths to do so, as well as interesting thoughts about a study abroad program.

The *Study Abroad in Guanajuato – World Heritage City* program will be running for five weeks in Mexico during this upcoming summer. The students will be taking two language courses and one focused on Mexican culture. The curriculum to be covered will be almost the same as we use on campus at Western, and it will be delivered in much the same way as we deliver our courses during the summer on campus as an intensive language program. *Culture of Latin America*, SPAN 332, has been designed to be a mix of academic and field trip experience. Besides traveling to three different cities and exploring Guanajuato itself, we will have Mexican instructors who will be teaching different courses about Mexico's cultural products.

The fact that our students will be living with Mexican families is a wonderful opportunity to connect communities. At the same time their contact with the Mexican instructors will enhance this connection. By putting in contact our US students with the Mexican population we hope to strengthen both communities and the perception that each of them has of the other. We can only hope that those relationships, as well as ours and Western's, will continue in the future.

Preliminary and Prospective Accomplishments

Leading a study abroad program without an in-country provider has been very challenging. The positive side of avoiding the creation of an internal group of power comes at the expense of having to be responsible not only for all of the academic side of the program but also for all of the logistical aspects of the program. Besides all of the immense work that all of this entails, we had to recruit students through classroom visits and advertising. That said, I believe it would be very rewarding to offer this experience every year. The program has a lot of potential for growth and hopefully will accomplish its ultimate goal: to connect and strengthen both communities.

Getting our Department and Global Learning Programs approval were certainly important accomplishments. The MCL Teaching Award that my colleague Portugal got at the end of winter term to do a preliminary trip to Guanajuato was another important accomplishment that

allowed us to do invaluable work in situ. At the same time, the initial contact and relationship we developed with the Guanajuato community constitutes a huge accomplishment for which we feel very fortunate. Finally, we see our program design as yet another accomplishment that, hopefully, will bear great fruit, since it embodies the university's mission to serve "the people of the State of Washington, the nation, and the world by bringing together individuals of diverse backgrounds and perspectives." (WWU Mission Statement)