

## From a Notion to a Nexus: The Evolvment of Wake Forest University in Nicaragua

The journey of Wake Forest University to the country of Nicaragua began in 2006 when MBA/MD student Chris Yuko rallied several of his colleagues around the idea of a *Pro Humanitate* effort to teach basic business practices to nascent entrepreneurs in Nicaragua – a country in which he had spent two years prior to attending Wake Forest and for which he had great affection. From that notion of “making a difference in the world” came a progression of ideas, programs, facilities, and support from across the University, thus forming the Nicaragua Nexus.

When the MBA students approached Ajay Patel, then-dean of the Babcock Graduate School of Management, about their notion of using funds from an Endowment for Responsible Business for the venture, he immediately saw promise in the venture and encouraged them to assess their personal commitment and broader interest from among their peers. With surprising numbers wanting to pursue prospects further and committing \$500 each to the trip, an exploratory trip was planned to Nicaragua in December 2006.

In Managua, Chris and two other students met with Roberto Espinoza, the director of El Herrero, a vocational school in-country dedicated to developing better business practices. Roberto helped the Wake Forest team identify a group of businesses that would benefit from working with MBA students in the spring of 2007.

That March, eighteen students and two professors spent spring break in Managua training local entrepreneurs in basic, sustainable business practices. This week-long trip began a series of programs known as “Project Nicaragua” that continues today with students leading week-long business seminars and consultations during winter, spring, and summer breaks, as well as maintaining a \$30,000 fund they created to provide loans to some of those entrepreneurs. Thus far, over 150 business owners have attended at least one of the seminars, more than 200 jobs have been created by these businesses, and two loans have been awarded.

The students’ and professors’ deeply meaningful *Pro Humanitate* experience in Nicaragua prompted Ajay Patel to invite Karyn and Tom Dingleline (MBA ’78) to join him on a trip to Nicaragua to see how the funds from their Responsible Business endowment had been spent and to determine if “Project Nicaragua” was sustainable. The Dinglelines became excited about complementing Karyn’s dedication to the arts at Wake Forest by supporting not only the Business School’s effort, but also the potential of expanding *Pro Humanitate* from across all academic units into Nicaragua, a yet untapped area of global involvement for the University.

To facilitate such expansion, Tom approached Provost Jill Tiefenthaler about the possibility of a facility in Managua to serve as a venue for the exchange of ideas between and among not only Wake Forest constituents, but also prospective Nicaraguan partners, other academic institutions

and corporate entities. The provost readily recognized the alignment of Karyn and Tom's vision with that of the University's – to become a crossroads of discussion on the important national and international issues of our time. She then entrusted Associate Provost for Global Affairs, Kline Harrison with the development of a strategic plan for a "Nicaragua Nexus" to maximize the University's potential involvement and influence in Nicaragua and an assessment plan to determine the feasibility of a complementary learning center. To assist the University in evaluating the potential in Nicaragua, Karyn and Tom funded an internship for Chris Yuko in Managua. Because of his personal commitment to the opportunity, Chris' took a year's sabbatical from his educational pursuits and sacrificed his dream of pursuing a medical degree to spend the year in Nicaragua.

In the summer of 2008 an excellent location was found to serve as the envisioned venue for a learning center. Situated on five acres of land with a view of Lake Managua, a 6,600 square-foot unfinished home had all the elements necessary to be transformed into an ideal training facility. When due diligence and assessment proved favorable, Karyn and Tom Dingledine provided a generous donation which enabled Wake Forest to purchase the property. With advisement from Ryan Swanson, University Architect, and consultation from the Dingledines, renovations began soon after, transforming the home into a conference center which includes two classrooms with translational booths, a reception hall, dining room, breakfast porch, library, seminar room, and terrace.

Complementing the purchase and renovation of the facility, strategic planning as a collegiate university commenced with the involvement of the Undergraduate College, the Graduate School, and the Schools of Divinity, Medicine, and Law, in addition to the Business Schools. In 2009, a Nicaragua Nexus program steering committee was formed, chaired by Ajay Patel and consisting of representatives from each of the academic units, with Tom Dingledine serving as an ex-officio member. The committee began meeting regularly to develop the mission, objectives, and strategies for the Nexus, as well as coordinate and collaborate their efforts across units.

Also in 2009, representatives from the College and the graduate and professional schools visited Nicaragua in August to cultivate new relationships and potential partnerships with local businesses, service organizations and universities. All of the representatives saw opportunities relative to their individual school or discipline for working with Nicaraguans and for providing personal and professional development for their students and faculty.

The Schools of Business at Wake Forest expanded their involvement beyond their business seminars by collaborating with the College of Arts and Sciences on a summer service-learning program for undergraduates. The business course offered in the program focused on *Social Enterprise Leadership in a Developing Country*, with a second course offered by the Romance Languages department within the College focused on *Society in Central America*.

The College continued to offer additional interdisciplinary service-learning trips during subsequent summers focusing on global health, nutrition, and communication in developing countries. While taking classes, students also worked in two non-profit organizations dedicated to providing health care to struggling Nicaraguans: Amigos for Christ and AMOS Health and Hope.

During the spring semester of 2009, students from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences had the opportunity to study with their undergraduate counterparts on a course offered by the Biology Department. This course focused on tropical conservation and, after seven weeks of study of campus, culminated in a week of study at a biological field station in Nicaragua during spring break.

Over the past two years, the School of Law has conducted webinars on import/export law for the INCAE Business School in Managua. Law students also recently wrote an investment plan for the Jubilee House (an organization facilitating worker-owned cooperatives in the Nicaraguan municipality of Ciudad Sandino) to attract investors who might finance additional cooperatives.

In alignment with Wake Forest's strategic goals as a collegiate university, the Law School also has collaborated with the Divinity and Medical Schools on a cross-disciplinary course focused on professional development. Offered during the spring breaks of 2010 and 2011 in Managua, this course is co-taught with faculty from each of the schools. Through seminars, field work, and service opportunities, the course explores what it means to be a member of the professional class and how this meaning is formed through training and practice.

Beginning in 2010, the Center for Enterprise Research and Education, an interdisciplinary group of faculty members from business, anthropology, and religion began research with a variety of Nicaraguan businesses. The goal of this research is to assess the needs of micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses and determine how entrepreneurial education and enterprise development improves the long-term welfare of individuals and communities.

During the summer of 2010, the Provost's Office for Global Affairs also launched a week-long summer program called LENS (Learning, Experiencing, Navigating, Solving) which is designed to prepare Nicaraguan high school students for leadership roles in business and society. Students from the American Nicaraguan High School and Lincoln International Academy International School participated in the inaugural offering, with St. Augustine Preparatory School joining the mix in future summers.

Through these multiple efforts over the past few years, Wake Forest University is realizing its vision of a Nicaragua Nexus. Looking to the future, the mission of the Nexus is to accomplish the University motto of *Pro Humanitate* by continuing to work with Nicaraguans to enhance their quality of life through collaborative partnerships with local and international organizations

in Nicaragua, while providing transformational experiences for students and faculty across the academic units of the University.

To meet this mission, its activities will continue to be directed towards helping serve unmet needs, and assisting those institutions and organizations currently providing services within Nicaragua. These activities are in the fields of healthcare, business, science, society, law and cross-cultural exchanges. Examples include:

- Helping local institutions deliver healthcare services that are either new or expanded, and consistent with the social, ethical, spiritual, environmental and economic needs of the Nicaraguan people.
- Working within local communities to build an infrastructure to further entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial activities that are socially responsible, environmentally friendly, ethical, and profitable, such that the people and communities of Nicaragua help themselves become more economically independent. This includes developing the capability to conduct international trade to promote economic growth.
- Exploring opportunities for collaborative research with regional institutions and scholars in seeking understanding of and solutions to social, economic, environmental and healthcare challenges within Nicaragua.
- Providing training and/or assistance by Wake Forest students and faculty to professions, agencies, and economic sectors as needed and appropriate. Working across our cultures to build partnerships characterized by growth, cooperation and mutual trust.

With its focus as a collegiate university on *Pro Humanitate* in Nicaragua, Wake Forest stands alone as an institution of higher learning with each of its academic units working continuously and collaboratively in a single developing country. Thanks to spirit of *Pro Humanitate* within Chris Yuko and his fellow students, Ajay Patel's personal commitment and recognition of the educational and personal value of experiential learning, and the active involvement and generous gift of Karyn and Tom Dingedine, the University has its extraordinary facility, *Casa Dingedine*, to serve as a venue for the exchange of ideas between and among not only its own collegiate constituents, but also its Nicaraguan partners, other academic institutions, and corporate entities. Without them, that original notion would not be the progressive Nexus it is today.