

Branding a Banana Republic [University]

My Visit to Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo, Guayaquil, Ecuador

by Associate Professor Mel M. Shanks

Part of my Summer Faculty Research grant (my first as a faculty member) included a visit to one of our partner universities in South America, the Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo. Although I have spent the better part of my adult life traveling in Central American countries, this was my first visit to our southern continent. I traveled to Guayaquil, Ecuador from Miami and arrived after dark. I was met at the airport by a representative of the Hotel Palace and after a quick introduction, we were off to the city which lies about 15 minutes south and east of Simon Bolivar International Airport. My first impression of the city was from the neighborhood streetlights upon our landing approach. We traveled along the new two-lane highway from the airport and through the tunnel, which cut through the Cerro de Santa Ana. This cerro (hill) is a prominent topographical feature of the city and after passing through, I found myself in the central business district and heart of the financial district.

I had researched the history behind the founding of Guayaquil, the largest major industrial and transportation center in Ecuador, while I was still in Troy. Guayaquil was a central seat of power during the Inca Empire and subsequent Spanish conquest of the New World. According to recorded history, the city was named after an indigenous Chief “Guayas” and his wife “Quil”, who both chose death as opposed to surrendering themselves to the Spanish rule. Francisco de Orellana founded Guayaquil on the skirts of Cerro de Santa Ana on July 25th, 1534; from there the city defended itself from numerous attacks by pirates and other would be conquerors. Its design is in the traditional Spanish/Portuguese cityscape, with monuments, statues and plazas flanked by cathedrals and government buildings. The largest municipal development of last century was the 1.5-mile Malecon 2000 Riverfront Park.

This postmodern architectural marvel includes museums, monuments, fountains, gardens, river excursions, restaurants/bars/food courts and shopping mall. The Riverfront Park winds along the banks of the gently flowing Guayas River, providing a truly unique blend of culture and nature, while uniting past with the present. Security is the first noticeable disparity

an American would find unnerving. Flack-jacketed, automatic weapon or pistol-equipped, private armed guards are visible in the doorways of almost every commercial storefront. Wrought iron fences, bars and barbed wire create a troubling; almost “martial law”, landscape detail. As such, the problems associated with the distribution of wealth may be Ecuador’s major tourism dilemma, the age-old struggle between “the haves” and the “have-nots” and the negative visual coercion it has on foreign visitors and tourists.

The campus at the Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo (UEES) is a continuation of this post-modern aesthetic. The mall style campus is located in the suburban area known as Samborondon. It is a little over a decade old and consists of a central plaza area (or “quad”) surrounded by two or three story classrooms and offices. It is impossible to ignore the emphasis on security; the entire campus is surrounded by 14’ wall with electronically controlled access points, security cameras and restricted access pedestrian turnstiles. I was later informed that the student body was generally from the upper middle class or higher and that this precaution was as much for the parent’s peace of mind as for the students themselves. Senor Manuel Murrieta met me at heavily secured main southern entrance. Manuel, a former marketing and advertising executive, proved to be an invaluable mentor for this research as he graciously gave his time and advice that served me my throughout my visit.

After a short briefing and introductions to staff, faculty and students, Mr. Murrieta arranged for a meeting with his department chair, Dr. Xavier Marmol, Dean of Communications and Academic Director, Dr. Albert C. Eyde. It was in this meeting that I was able to begin an unofficial dialogue concerning the shared interests of UEES and Troy University. “The success behind UEES is it’s faculty and student body”... according to Dr. Eyde (an American who has spent the past 20 years in Ecuador). He attributes the university’s growth to its branding position within the country’s educational system and to its policies governing collaboration with colleges and universities outside the country. The “international” emphasis is reflected in the foundation course work, a foreign language or extended classes in a foreign language are requirements with English, Japanese and French offered. This (competency in a second language) is an area that we (meaning Troy University) may actually be deficient in our curriculum. At present, UEES utilizes “2+1+1, 1+2+1, 2+2 and 3+1”

international study formats. The leaning towards the 1+2+1 model utilized by Troy, seems most likely to succeed in the final analysis, but the dynamics of this small university (enrollment: 600 students) allow it to be adaptive no matter which model may be implemented. The actual course catalog and degree outlines are very similar to Troy University's, with the underlying emphasis on aesthetics, as opposed to technological expertise, being virtually identical. Although we met only briefly, I sensed an overwhelming interest to explore possible future programs, course content comparisons and evaluations, faculty and student exchanges as well as individual student project collaboration. UEES confirmed my previous impressions of having the success of its students as its primary objective; the administration and staff vigorously confirmed this.

As my visit neared its end, I sat down to dinner with my associate and now friend Professor Murietta to discuss tangible results we might build upon. Of course since this visit was of an exploratory nature and unofficial in charter, we candidly discussed how we could personally begin collaborations, what types and subjects of projects and the timetable within we felt we could succeed. Professor Murietta indicated several areas that would fall under his immediate expertise, namely the courses that he will instruct next semester: Propaganda, Statistical Data Forms & Polls and a marketing research subject yet to be determined. We agreed to commensurate with our fellow faculty members and create a list of subjects, which we may explore in the future. Other areas for possible consideration included Architecture & the Influence of Art in Graphic Design, Branding & Identity Development for International Clients and The Cultural Impact of Graphic Design in Multi-Racial Societies.

My Conclusion

The future belongs to global hybridization and academic, cultural and technological collaboration. Students and graduates will enter an entirely different market than faced a generation ago. It is my opinion that the universities and colleges that recognize the socio-economic evolution and are able to adjust their curriculum to better prepare their student body will provide the future leadership in education. This is the vision of Chancellor Hawkins' and the faculty at Troy University. The spirit of co-operation and achievement is mirrored in its affiliation with the administration and faculty of the Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo (UEES), in Guayaquil, Ecuador.