

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION WITH LATIN AMERICA: A CASE STUDY

Russell McKenzie, Southeastern Louisiana University
Tará B. Lopez, Southeastern Louisiana University
Aristides R. Baraya, Southeastern Louisiana University

ABSTRACT

For more than fifteen years, Southeastern Louisiana University has been working with the Latin American Community through the University's Latin American Business Development Initiative (LABDI) program. The purpose of the LABDI is to strengthen and stimulate entrepreneurship and leadership skills among citizens in Latin American countries and the American Hispanic Community, as well as to develop closer international relations between the United States and Latin American countries. The LABDI has developed strategic partnerships with government agencies, universities, chambers of commerce, business leaders, and non-profit organizations in Louisiana and Latin America. Through these partnerships, LABDI has been able to truly enhance opportunities for Latin Americans abroad and the American Hispanic Community. The LABDI has also been able to broaden the scope of its impact as a result of the enhanced relationship between the State of Louisiana and Hispanic countries. The purpose of this article is to describe the LABDI's approach to developing partnerships and creating impactful programs to support others who may be interested in similar programs at their universities. This article will also highlight the significant contributions of LABDI on Southeastern's campus and with partners in Latin America and the Caribbean region.

Keywords: Latin American Business, International Partnerships, Higher Education.

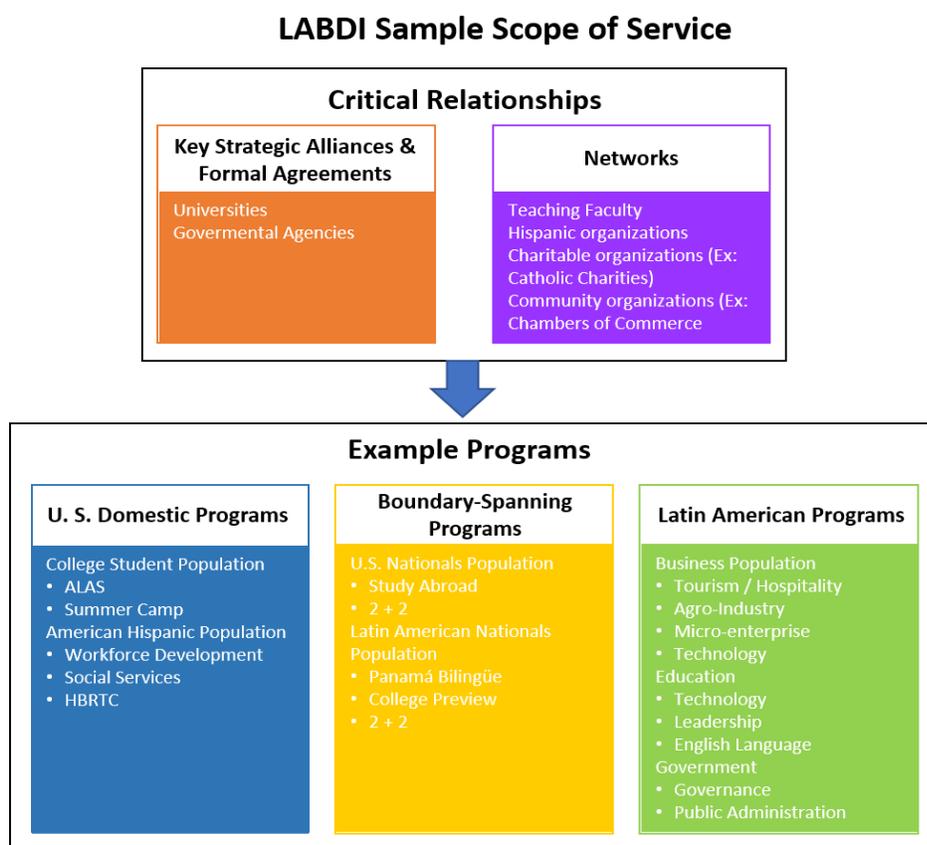
INTRODUCTION

The development of a global vision in the formation of human capital is the cornerstone that guarantees economic and social growth for developed as well as developing countries. Expanding the global awareness of a country's population can improve competition and strengthen democracies (Gaviria, 1999). The Latin American region is one of rich bilateral opportunities for the United States. Today, joint United States – Latin American international education programs can help to develop an appreciation of cultural diversity, modernize business practices, and provide educational opportunities to the Latin American population. These programs can strengthen cultural awareness and develop international networks for the U.S population. Through the creation of opportunity, U.S. – Latin American international education programs are a great adventure that opens a path to a better future for both countries.

Higher education institutions are responsible for preparing students for continued globalization. Such institutions also typically have missions to offer programs that support constituents at the regional, state, or national level. To address this, some universities have established partnerships and broadened their networks in order to integrate global education inside and outside of the classroom (Damme, 2012). Globalization has put pressure on higher education systems to develop impactful international programs or be left behind.

The Latin American Business Development Initiative (LABDI) at Southeastern Louisiana University was created to advance global education among the university’s students and the Latin American population. The LABDI is fully sustained through self-generated revenue. Though initially focused on the University’s student population, LABDI has expanded its service mission to support the American Hispanic Community in the United States and to develop closer international relations between the United States and Latin American countries through domestic and international programs tailored for target populations. This effort has resulted in a permanent dialogue and active business development with our partners in the U.S. and Latin America.

To make meaningful and widespread impact, international educational programs on a university campus require far more than the standard administrative and bureaucratic decisions. It requires special attention focused on creating awareness of the program. It requires initiative to develop inter-personal relationships and trust with partners, defined collaboration agreements, understanding of cross-cultural characteristics, promotion of academic exchange, internationalization of the curriculum, and quality assurance in the programs, among other skills and efforts. In the following sections, the scope of service provided by the LABDI will be discussed, including the key relationships and programs that have contribute to the initiative’s success. Figure 1 offers an overview of the scope of work done by the LABDI. The goal is to provide inspiration to other university international program as they consider their scope of influence and evaluate how they might expand their impact.



**FIGURE 1
LABDI SAMPLE SCOPE OF SERVICE**

CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships form the foundation of international programs that seek a broadened scope and meaningful impact. The importance of these relationships is significant for LABDI. But it is also a high priority for many international institutions, including government agencies and higher education. As Jongbloed et al. (2008) point out, the changing governance of higher education (like that taking place in Latin America) makes establishing and maintaining strong relationships with all stakeholders (domestic and international) a critical part of institutions' efforts to reach their goals. Without such relationships, the LABDI could not offer such innovative and wide-reaching programs. The LABDI has grown relationships with international governments, universities, local and global organizations, and within the university. These relationships support the LABDI in different ways. Some offer financial support for programs through donations or grants, others have offered expertise, or access to their networks. This rich network also serves as a constant source of ideas and motivation to keep the organization informed about opportunities and needs of the community in which it can be of assistance.

LABDI, has formed beneficial formal agreements or strategic alliances with the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States, Louisiana Economic Development, The Government of Costa Rica, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States, Ciudad Del Saber (City of Knowledge) in Panama City, University of Distance Education, Costa Rica, Melanie Klein Foundation-School in Colombia, the Technological University of Costa Rica, University of Cartagena, Colombia, University Latina of Panama, and several local organizations. These partnerships work together in an expanding network to facilitate educational business experiences and cultural relationships.

The LABDI network also includes people and organizations that can support the initiative's mission, such as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Louisiana, the Catholic Charities Archdiocese New Orleans- Hispanic Apostolate, and the Jefferson Parish Public Schools System, and The Chamber of Industry of Costa Rica. The LABDI also develops relationships with faculty in each of the disciplines in which it offers training, including Business, Education, and Government. These alliances provide LABDI with opportunities to connect with international students, business professionals, and resources.

PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

To meet our objectives, we support activities and programs that enhance business competitiveness, educational opportunities, and cooperation with Latin American countries, agencies, universities, governments as well as those in the United States. The results contribute to the economic well-being of the United States, Latin American countries, the State of Louisiana, and the local region of our university. A few of our most successful programs are discussed below.

U.S. Domestic Programs

The LABDI U.S. domestic programs target two populations – Hispanic college students and the American Hispanic population. These groups are targeted through numerous initiatives of the institute.

Association of Latin American Students - The Latin American Business Development Initiative plays a critical role in attending and assisting Latin American students at Southeastern Louisiana University in their educational progress. This type of community outreach helps increase access to higher education within traditionally disadvantaged communities (Scull & Cuthill, 2010). To help them adapt successfully within the University, LABDI has created the Association of Latin American Students (ALAS). International students often experience culture shock when they arrive on American university campuses. Some issues they struggle with can include, homesickness, a lack of access to public transportation, and a lack of familiarity with the cultural norms. ALAS offers a support network for Hispanic student to improve the retention and progression toward graduation. The organization also helps to enhance the appreciation of diversity and cross-cultural awareness, leadership, and cohesiveness of all members as well as to build a better understanding between Latin American students and the local community. ALAS members not only support each other, but also actively participate in community outreach and service. ALAS has conducted an annual toy drive and voluntary tutoring for the area Hispanic community.

Hispanic Leadership Summer Camp - A second program to support the retention and progression of college students is the Hispanic Leadership Summer Camp. It was designed to guide the formative and creative educational processes of Hispanic college students to help them succeed in their education careers and professional life. The programs focus is to serve Hispanic students from the colleges of business from universities in Louisiana. With a comprehensive portfolio of activities and working side-by-side with top business executives and community leaders, participants in the camp will develop a new spirit of interdependence through a broad array of experiences. The principal subject areas for the summer camp's workshops and conferences are Leadership and Service, Entrepreneurial Creativity, Youth empowerment, and Critical thinking.

The LABDI has offered several programs to serve the American Hispanic Population in its region. The goal for these programs is to improve economic opportunity through education for participants and to improve business access to a qualified workforce in the region.

Hispanic Business and Community Service Program - The Institute sponsored activities to enhance the technical education, health, and social services to the Hispanic population in the region. A fundamental part of this program was designed to promote, within the Hispanic community of the region, methods to improve health, child development, vaccination, and eating habits. Distinctive features of the program include opportunities for Southeastern Louisiana University students to engage in service-learning activities in real and relevant dialogue with the Hispanic population. The success of this program relied heavily on the support of several businesses and private organizations for financial support and several charitable organizations to get the message out to the Hispanic community. More than 420 people have received the benefits of this program.

Hispanic Business Resources & Technology Center (HBRTC) - In August 2005, Katrina displaced more than one million people; it destroyed or severely disrupted more than 40% of Louisiana's economic base. Thousands of small businesses ceased to exist. The growing Hispanic population in southeast Louisiana faced a unique and distinctive socio-economic challenge. As large numbers of Hispanics moved into the region seeking work and other opportunities, critical needs emerged. The Hispanic Business Resources and Technology Center was inaugurated on Monday, March 13, 2006, to address these urgent needs of the Hispanic community in the New Orleans region.

A variety of work-related programs were developed and social skills were nurtured to build a healthy and literate workforce thanks to a coalition of public and private entities collaborated. The four founding partners, the Hispanic Apostolate of the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans (CCANO), the Jefferson Parish Public School System (JPPSS), the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Louisiana (HCCL), and Southeastern Louisiana University's College of Business through its Latin American Business Development Initiative, dedicated staff and resources to the Center to develop business and social services programs that target the needs of the Hispanic Community. These programs are bilingual in format and culturally sensitive.

As we move farther away from Katrina, the programs and services offered initially at the HBRTC have evolved accordingly. Today, we are proud to offer the only web-based bilingual soft skills workforce development-training program in the State. Adult learners can study at their own pace at the Center with the assistance of a Hispanic instructor/case manager or can work from computers at home or library. Over 200 adult learners enroll per year in our workforce program, and we place over 150 per year in full-time jobs as they complete the programs.

Latin American Programs

One goal of the Institute is to share its expertise in business and a variety of other disciplines with individuals in Latin American nations. Through the LABDI's relationships with a variety of internationally governments and organizations, the institute has been asked to offer business, educational, and governmental leaders from Latin American valuable insight and practical expertise designed to help them improve the economic, social and political environment in their countries. The LABDI training programs range in scope from technology and micro-enterprise skills for the Kuna Indians of Panamá to the Local Governments in Colombia and Honduras. The LABDI has offered training areas such as Management of Agro-Industry Enterprises, Government and Governance, Global Information and Technology, Leadership and Education, Public Administration, Hospitality, Managerial Tourism, and many more. These programs have been offered in the Republic of Panamá, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Dominican Republic. More than 1,785 business leaders, government officials, educators, students, and individuals from Latin America have been trained through our programs.

Boundary-Spanning Programs

The LABDI has also developed opportunities that help Latin Americans visit and experience programs in the U.S and Americans participate in programs in Latin America. These include Study Abroad Programs, the Panamá Bilingüe program, International transfer opportunities, and the College Preview program.

Study Abroad Programs - Study abroad can be a great learning experience for business students and faculty with advantages both in and out of the classroom. Research shows education abroad makes American students more tolerant and respectful, more analytical of themselves and others as they can learn to value the needs and thought patterns of other societies (Wright & Larsen, 2012). Indeed, students in the U.S. who participate in study abroad programs can learn much about U.S. students through such programs (Budden et al., 2014). Today's students are also motivated to travel overseas. The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey (2019) shows that 57% of Millennials and Gen Z's thought of seeing the world as a priority. Traveling was top on their

list of aspirations, while only 39% of Millennials and 45% wanted to have children and start a family. (Juban et al., 2019).

Study abroad programs offer a wealth of benefits for both students and participating faculty. Study abroad brings together faculty and students in meaningful learning environments. Even at small regional universities, time spent establishing relationships with institutions and individuals in the host countries significantly increases the impact to students (McKenzie et al., 2010). It engages students in love for exploring and interacting with new cultures. Studying abroad allows students to experiment a new way of learning. The LABDI works directly with study abroad programs to Costa Rica and the Republic of Panamá. There is an average of 70 to 100 students per year enrolled in the programs (Juban & Budden, 2006).

Panamá Bilingüe - Southeastern has a long history of friendship with the Republic of Panamá. Because of this and the excellent relations with members of the government of Panamá and private companies, Southeastern was selected as a host for the Panamá Bilingüe program. Panamá Bilingüe is an English language and educational methods training program in which pre-services and in-service teachers studied at Southeastern Louisiana University for 16 weeks or 8 weeks, respectively. The LABDI supported the program through curriculum development, extra-curricular activities, providing social services, and tutoring for the visiting students. This program not only benefits the teachers and students of Panama, but it also serves as a cross-cultural experience to Southeastern students and surrounding community. The vision of this program is to achieve a pedagogical improvement of the Panamanian teachers dedicated to ESL in their school system and help them serve as a transference medium of knowledge. Through this program, we provided the teachers with the skills needed to integrate English language, education, leadership, and technology across their curriculum. More than 500 Panamanian teachers have attended our program.

International Transfer Opportunities - Southeastern Louisiana University's College of Business, in its effort to expand the global perspectives and increase its service to Latin Americans, worked with the LABDI to establish an International Agreement of Cooperation for Transfer Evaluation. The agreement encourages Latin American students to seek an opportunity to study at an American university and enhance their global perspective. The curriculum incorporates varied instructional methods and courses to achieve an optimal blend of theory and real-world application. Through the International Agreement of Cooperation for Transfer Evaluation, we offer Latin American students the most comprehensive set of classes as well as quality instruction and international educational opportunities. The agreements assist students in making a seamless transition to Southeastern for the completion of course requirements to obtain a bachelor's degree in a variety of business discipline. The process includes a review of foundation courses that may be transferred to Southeastern. After evaluation of the course requirements for the degree, students will be admitted to Southeastern to complete their junior and senior-level courses. This type of agreement encourages timely student progression by making sure that students are prepared to come to Southeastern for the completion of their degree. Universities that have been a part of this program are University Latina of Panama, Panama, University ST Thomas, Colombia, University Cristobal Columbus, Mexico, University EL Salvador, Salvador, and University of Cartagena, Colombia.

College Preview - Working with multiple Latin American high schools, the LABDI offers a college preview program that allows Latin American high school students a sample of the university education experience in the United States. Latin American high school students

visit Southeastern Louisiana University for a period of four days to a week, attend daily lectures, and experience university dining halls and extra-curricular activities.

LESSONS

Based on over fifteen years of experience with the LABDI, we have experienced both successes and opportunities to learn from mistakes. The true key to the success of the LABDI can be drilled down to its relationships. A strong network is essential for university international programs to operate at this level. Our philosophy for relationship development can be summarized by 3 I's: *Involvement, Interest, Initiative*. Relationships take time to develop and must be nurtured. The first step is to *get involved*. Show up at relevant university and community events. Introduce yourself – pick up the phone, send an email. The second step is to be *interested* before expecting others to find you or your cause *interesting*. Find out about their organization, discover what issues others are dealing with, what problems they are trying to solve extend an offer to help, volunteer where you have something to contribute. The final step is to take the *initiative* to ask for what you need. Needs can come in many forms including financial, knowledge, skillsets, or effort. You must get comfortable asking for what you need, be specific and be ready to articulate the benefit that will result.

CONCLUSION

When LABDI was launched, our focus was to work with and contribute to the Latin American Community, but our impact has surpassed its initial scope. Meanwhile, it has generated tremendous benefits to the stakeholders in its mission. The Initiative contributed with positive and measurable results on the Hispanic community in the State of Louisiana. More significantly, its activities and vision have crossed the State's borders and have even reached outside the U.S. borders. All of these efforts are in place to create a real and long-term impact in economic development to the Latin American community from both business and social perspectives. The beauty of the Latin American Business Development Initiative is that it is not a political, nor a governmental, nor a commercial organism. It is a service-educational organization with a holistic vision and a clear focus on the well-being and interests of the Hispanic community. Through the Initiative, we are making headway in defining and gaining confidence, optimism, and hope for Hispanic college students, American Hispanics, and Latin American people. We have to continue to work and put our efforts toward a process of creating a real impact through the economic, business, and social development of the Latin American community.

While many of the Initiative's programs are focused on specific populations and localities, the approaches used to build the relationships necessary to support such programs can be adapted to other situations. The focus on developing and maintaining relationships with stakeholders, regardless of who or where they are is the fundamental foundation for building lasting programs that have meaningful impacts.

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