

PES Team joins University of La Salle – Bogotá with Partners in the Americas Exchange

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A team from Plant and Environmental Sciences recently went to Colombia for two weeks of classes and cultural exchange programs at University of La Salle's campuses in Yopal and Bogotá. The November trip was in partial fulfillment of agreements in the Partners in the Americas project between La Salle and NMSU. The team, led by Mick O'Neill, included Blair Stringam from the main campus and Dan Smeal from ASC-Farmington, as well as grad student James Fulton, and undergrad students Jimmy Maynes, Sativa Cruz, and Megan Stovall.



The Utopia project is a unique educational concept that integrates agricultural, educational, and productive opportunities for resource-limited young people – men and women from rural areas of Colombia – who have been traumatized by violence during 20-30 years of drug wars. The 200+ Utopia project students at Yopal are selected through a highly competitive process (only about 1 in 100 applicants is selected). They carry out a four-year program for an Agricultural Engineer (Agronomy) degree; three years are conducted on campus in educational and field crop production programs while the fourth year is spent in their home villages to do a community development agricultural project. Partial financial support is provided by the university; the students pay a small tuition in order to realize they are investing in their only chance to have a future. A typical day at the Utopia project begins at 5:30 a.m. with hands-on work in the crop production and research fields. Breakfast is at 8:00 followed by classes for the remainder of the morning. Lunch is at noon and then back to classes until 4:00. Students then have “free time” which is filled with more field work, class preparation and homework, and sports or other recreational activities. Dinner in the evening is at 6:00 and then students get back to their books or other extracurricular programs. Although there is little time for outside activities with this intensive regime, the NMSU team had never seen so many smiling faces on students anywhere previously visited.

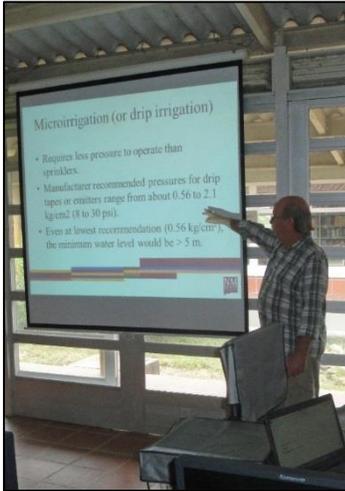


The PES faculty and students participated in classes presented by La Salle faculty covering Colombian culture and agriculture, visited water sources for a possible irrigation system, as well as labs, and crop production and research fields managed/cultivated by Utopia project students at the Yopal Campus. A unique aspect of the educational and practical experience continuum is that students carry out soil and plant tissue analysis in well-equipped labs on issues associated with the crops they are growing in their fields,



creating a rapid field to diagnosis process. Two of the PES students were crucial in providing English-Spanish and Spanish-English translations for the rest of the team. All four students blended in with the Utopia students so well that it was difficult to pry them away when time came to leave Yopal and return to Bogotá.

PES faculty taught classes about New Mexico agriculture, irrigation, water harvesting, meteorological data acquisition, and climate-based irrigation scheduling at the Yopal and Bogotá campuses. Students



were always eager to learn from the “foreigners” – classes and discussions were held in regular classrooms, in cropping fields, and even on the walkway between buildings. Several students cornered Blair along the walk and asked him to help them solve a water flow problem they had for their rapidly approaching exam. Although the problem was in Spanish, he was able to go through the math steps and show the students how to solve the problem, just in time for their next class. In addition to irrigation classes taught by Blair, Dan explained the principles of microirrigation, emitter flow rates, and the use of meteorological data to calculate reference evapotranspiration for climate-based irrigation scheduling. Mick shared his experience with northwest New Mexico irrigated agriculture and taught classes on procedures for using the aWhere Weather Module in the acquisition of meteorological data used

in reference evapotranspiration calculations. Lectures given by NMSU faculty were at both the Yopal and Bogotá campuses for the University of La Salle.

A final wrap-up presentation of the two-week exchange was given by Mick to the La Salle President, Brother Carlos Gómez, the International Affairs Office staff, the US Embassy Cultural Attaché, the Embassy Higher Education Attaché, and a representative from the Partners in the Americas overseeing projects in Colombia. The oral presentation covered the importance of Partners in the Americas; background on the NMSU participants; classes, field trips, and excursions in both Yopal and Bogotá; student interactions and exchanges; and suggestions for continuing



the project after the current one-year timeframe. The students and faculty gave emotional testimony of the transformative impact they experienced from their association with the Utopia students. Mick and Sativa gave video interviews covering their experiences and possible directions of the project. Sufficient enthusiasm was expressed by the US Embassy and Partners representatives to warrant development of a larger project proposal. The final dinner for the group was a memorable affair hosted by Bro. Carlos, along with the Academic Vice President and staff from the La Salle International Affairs Office. His appreciation for NMSU’s commitment to this unique partnership was impressively conveyed throughout the evening.

In April 2015, a similar size group from La Salle is scheduled to visit NMSU.