

CROSSING BORDERS

How my international experience has affected my view of the world.

By Ivan Flores Martinez

ifloresm@uncc.edu

My journey to USA started 45 years ago, when my mother left her village and moved to the city to get a college degree. At that time, it was not fashionable for women to study beyond high school because they were expected to get married. My mother, however, had more ambitious plans for her life. She wanted to become a chemist and move to a country where women have a more equal stand. Unfortunately, she didn't have the educational and financial resources to do it. These are important requirements to study abroad, and only the privileged ones have them. This was not her case. Hence, she remained in the country with her dreams unfulfilled.

I inherited my mother's dreams when I was born. Since I was a child, I dreamt about visiting other places and meeting people. One of my favorite books talked about the myths and legends in other countries. The legend of King Arthur resonated deeply within me. I perceived it as a kind of utopia where knights live according to chivalric rules and the highest ideals. Later, I read the Federalist papers and the debates around the American Constitution and I was deeply moved. I imagined that there was a society where the ideals of freedom and justice were actively pursued, and I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

However, opportunities to study abroad in Mexico are hard to get. There is a lot of competition for financial resources and most scholarships are given to students in STEM areas. Fortunately, I was lucky to find a program at UNCC that provided me enough funding to fulfill my dream. The Public Policy Program has taught me how to make the institutions of my country better and more just and expanded my knowledge about how

to do rigorous social science and active field work in my country. Enrollment in the Public Policy Program at UNCC has also come with other unexpected benefits.

First, studying abroad has helped me develop a more comprehensive view of my culture. Antonio Caso, one of the greatest Mexican cultural scholars, argued that you cannot fully understand your national identity until you find out what is it that makes it unique. This is a comparative endeavor. You need to experience other ways of life to really know what your culture is about. Similarly, comparing your country's institutions with those of the country you are visiting helps you understand better their limitations. Not in every part of the world, institutions guarantee the same proportion of civil/property rights or the provision of public goods (such as health systems and education), all of which are important for the wellbeing of its citizens. Studying abroad has helped me understand my country's political and institutional deficits and has provided me with ideas to address their problems.

Second, the program's focus on comparative research has made me more aware of the structural inequalities that some groups face in Latin America. These inequalities are based on the lack of opportunities and adequate training of certain groups of the population, but also on bias and prejudice. In one of my research projects, I found that having a darker skin is strongly associated with decreased wealth and less schooling in Mexico and other Latin American countries. I was surprised to see that data in Mexico clearly showed that people with white skin, completing more years of schooling than those with browner skin – 10 years vs 6.5. That's a stunning 45 percent gap in educational achievement between the darkest- and lightest-skinned Mexicans. More importantly, among nations surveyed in the Americas Barometer, Mexico ranks fourth in terms of the

negative impact of skin-tone on an individual's wealth, behind Bolivia, Uruguay and Ecuador. Without a comparative perspective, I wouldn't have become aware of the magnitude of this problem.

Going forward, my research will focus on examining the origins of this problem, from employer discrimination for access to health care. After getting my PhD, I want to go back to my country to contribute to the creation of policies that maintain a balance between economic efficiency and redistribution of wealth, while considering the multiple factors that create complex public problems: economic, social, political and institutional. Designing public policies with this objective in mind, will produce a fairer society that results in more access to economic opportunities for the population, lower student desertion rates and higher levels of education in the country. In addition, I want to represent minorities and non-privileged groups that are usually excluded from the public agenda.

As Pope Francis says, giving a voice to the marginalized "it's probably like a drop of water in the desert of poverty; and yet it can be a sign of love, brotherhood and sharing for those who are in need. The poor do not need an act of delegation, but the personal commitment of those who hear their cry". After hearing this, I decided to battle injustice in the world with all the means available. But, more importantly, I want to do this because a long time ago I inherited a dream from my mom. This dream said that with hard work and persistence you can achieve anything you want. I am the living proof of this. I am the first member of my family that studies abroad. As my predecessors, I want to pass this dream to those who are yet to come. This is a debt I have with my family and my country, but also with my fellow citizens who dream of a better and more just society. I recognize

that I have a long way to go in attaining my vision. However, I am confident that with hard work, dedication and the support of others, I will attain my goal.