

Student Engagement in Social Justice at the *Universidad Centroamericana*

Gianna Maita
Georgetown University

Civic engagement of young people has evolved in Nicaragua as its political environment has changed. There is a marked difference between youth involvement in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution from 1979 through the early 1980s, when it was a cultural norm for young people to serve in solidarity with the poor, and today, when universities must push students to connect and learn with disadvantaged communities. Interviews about service-learning, community-based research and other programs in marginalized, local communities and the broader Nicaraguan society were conducted at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) with students, faculty, staff, and community members to explore what this evolving dynamic of social justice engagement looks like at a Jesuit University. On the campus of the UCA, the change in youth interest in civic involvement is clear, though the possible reasons for this change vary.

In the summer of 2014, the researcher partnered with the *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA), a Jesuit institution of higher education in Managua, Nicaragua. The researcher conducted interviews with students, faculty, staff, and community members about service-learning, community-based research, and other programs that engage UCA students in marginalized, local communities and the broader Nicaraguan society. Her research focuses on student involvement in social justice issues within the context of Nicaraguan history and the current political atmosphere of the country.

Partner Institutions: *Universidad Centroamericana* – Nicaragua

The *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA), or Central American University, in Managua is the first private university in Central America and a member of the Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America (AUSJAL). As a part of the AUSJAL, the UCA is committed to a policy of social responsibility that requires it to respond to social needs in its communities through the curriculum and through research. AUSJAL universities have a responsibility to develop responses to social challenges that successfully promote sustainable human development and are motivated by the promotion of justice, solidarity, and social equality (Pérez Díaz, Idíquez, Rodrigues, Uriarte, & Solis, 2013, p. 95). The UCA “wants to be a university interested in forming citizens who care about their country” said Gaston Ortega, the coordinator of UCA’s Social Service Program. It does this through its curriculum, academic research institutions, and extra-curricular programs that facilitate student engagement in the transformation of Nicaraguan society and learn about equality and justice in solidarity with the communities they serve.

Introduction

Through the late 1920s and early 1930s, Augusto César Sandino, a Nicaraguan nationalist, led a guerrilla movement against the United States’ occupation of Nicaragua (Belli, 2003). After 1933, one family, the Somoza Garcías, controlled Nicaragua under a repressive military dictatorship for four decades. Although this dictatorship was supported by the United States government, it failed to improve the lives of poor Nicaraguans (Merrill, 1993). In the 1970s, a socialist

movement called the Sandinista National Liberation Front gained considerable support among Nicaragua's poorest people. Violence between the Sandinistas, many of them teenaged fighters, and the National Guard killed many young Nicaraguans from 1974 to 1979, when the hard-line Sandinista faction took control of Nicaragua with other members of a junta (Barrios de Chamorro, 1996).

The junta government, controlled by the Sandinistas made a pledge to work for political pluralism, a mixed economic system, and a nonaligned foreign policy (Merrill, 1993). Jesuit priests played a large role in improving Nicaragua during this time: Padre Fernando Cardenal even became the Minister of Education, though he was excommunicated by the Vatican during his time as a politician. The Jesuit priest led efforts to increase literacy in Nicaragua through the National Literacy Crusade and the Basic Education Program. However, the Sandinista government struggled to remain pluralistic and uncorrupt and the United States attempted to influence Nicaragua once more, resorting to violence when political manipulation failed (Barrios de Chamorro, 1996; Belli, 2003). Nicaraguans became disillusioned by the Sandinista vision in the face of a new kind of government corruption and intense hardships brought about by US military actions (Barrios de Chamorro, 1996). The first free and fair Nicaraguan elections in 1990 unseated the Sandinistas in favor of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, leader of the National Opposition Union. President Chamorro's neo-liberal government brought about conservative reform and concessions to the US government that ended the Contra War (Belli, 2003). In 2007, Daniel Ortega was elected to be president once more under the slogan "*Nicaragua Socialista Cristiana y Solidaria!*" Rosario Murillo, President Ortega's wife, speaks each morning for fifteen minutes to inform the people of what is occurring in their country; this is the media's main source of information about the government's activities—a challenge for those in the education field, as discussed later.

The civic engagement of young people has evolved in Nicaragua as its political environment has changed. There is a marked difference between youth involvement in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Revolution from 1979 through the early 1980s, when it was a cultural norm for young people to serve in solidarity with those who were less fortunate, and today, when universities must push students to connect with disadvantaged communities to learn and build relationships. On the campus of the UCA, this change in youth interest in civic engagement is especially prominent.

Youth engagement in social justice through the past few decades and specifically on the campus of the UCA was explored in 20 one-hour interviews with various people living and working at the UCA and several individuals connected to the university's social justice initiatives. Interviewees included: 1) directors of two social justice- and education-minded institutes at the UCA; 2) the Former Minister of Education of Nicaragua, who is now a Jesuit priest; 3) eight faculty and staff of the UCA; 4) nine UCA students majoring in accounting, philosophy, architecture, sociology, marketing, and economics; 5) one former UCA student; 6) one local small business owner and community partner; and 7) one former Georgetown student and novice Jesuit who was working at the UCA over the summer.

This report examines the historical context of youth engagement in solidarity and social justice, and then focuses on the current context of student engagement at the UCA. An analysis of the potential reasons for current student interest in social justice—including the political context of Nicaraguan education, the economic backgrounds of students, and their own attitudes towards social justice issues—will follow. The report concludes by comparing the impacts that the different initiatives have on students' comprehension of and critical thinking about social justice issues and by exploring further possibilities presented by the University's new Social Service program.

Youth Engagement in Social Justice in Nicaragua's History

First launched in 1980, the literacy campaigns in Nicaragua were national initiatives organized by the Ministry of Education and strove to teach all Nicaraguans to read (Lankshear, 1993, p. 118). The Sandinista victory had only recently occurred before the National Literacy Crusade began without much organization. Padre Fernando Cardenal remembers that the Sandinista leaders “gave me the order [to create a literacy campaign] but they did not give me the money!” In order to create a successful and cost-effective campaign, Cardenal asked the youth of Nicaragua for their service as volunteers. The largest part of the National Teaching Corps, which was the government-organized umbrella organization for all volunteers who participated in the literacy campaigns, was the Popular Literacy Army (EPA), led by the national Sandinista youth organization, *Juventud Sandinista Diecinueve de Julio*. Youth *brigadistas* in the EPA traveled to poor rural and urban areas to teach their fellow Nicaraguans to read (Miller, 1985, p. 63). In rural areas, *brigadistas* stayed with host families for five months, teaching and completing chores with the family (Miller, 1985, p. 169). They built strong relationships based on solidarity; as the youth taught their families and neighbors to read, the *campesinos* taught them skills for living in the mountains and the countryside—something that they had never experienced in their urban lives (Miller, 1985, p. 170). Many *brigadistas* even called their host parents “Mother” and “Father.” In the communities, too, teachers and learners worked in solidarity with one another, completing development projects such as the construction of toilets in villages without adequate sanitation (Lankshear, 1993, p. 122).

Most volunteers were well off and had not known what it meant to be poor in Nicaragua before they lived with the *campesinos*, but soon they began to understand. Padre Cardenal explains that, “they were transformed in solidarity. They began to worry about the people of their country, about the future of their country.” These grassroots literacy efforts were life-changing for the 60,000 volunteers in the mountains and 40,000 volunteers in the *barrios* on the outskirts of cities who gave five months to the cause of education in Nicaragua during the National Literacy Crusades. They learned the meaning of solidarity, came to understand the complex social justice issues that their country faced, and were immersed in a reality different from their own. The children of the literacy *brigadistas* are now around the same age that their parents were when they went into the mountains. These young adults, who now make up Nicaragua's university student population, grew up with the legacy of the literacy campaigns, visiting their *campesino* grandparents and hearing the stories of the *brigadistas*.

The UCA itself kept students deeply engaged in social justice issues before and during the Sandinista Revolution through the Juan XXIII Institute for Social Action. Named after Pope John XXIII and often colloquially called “Juan XXIII,” the Juan XXIII Institute for Social Action was founded at the UCA in 1961. While the institute does not now directly engage students at the UCA, students were heavily involved in the institute's research and social action programs throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In its first 25 years, the institute mainly served as a means for UCA students to experience and understand Nicaragua's realities of poverty, inequality, and marginalization. According to Edwin Novoa Martinez, the current Director of the Juan XXIII Institute, students at the UCA from the 1960s to the early 1980s could “achieve committed immersion in this reality, in such a way that, at the end of their studies, they had had this experience and would be more sensitive and committed to the changes that the country needs—a country with many difficulties with social justice” through the institute. In the mid-1980s, however, the Sandinista Revolution led to a change in the Juan XXIII Institute's approach to development in Nicaragua. The directors of the institute decided to focus their work on the

¹ “July Nineteenth Sandinista Youth,” named after the day of the victory of the Sandinista Revolution

² The titles for the youth volunteers.

³ Rural farmers

⁴ Neighborhoods

families who were displaced by the post-revolution armed conflict, who were in the greatest need. The institute played a leading role in supporting displaced families, and contributed much to Nicaragua's human development at this time. Over time, students were able to participate in these efforts less and less frequently. The programs of the Juan XXIII Institute were far from the university—too far for a day or even a weekend service trip. Additionally, those areas became more dangerous as the conflict persisted. UCA students still participated in service as the Sandinistas came to power, but they served locally as volunteers, cutting coffee or cotton to raise the nation's production, or through the national literacy campaigns.

As Nicaragua changed regimes again in 1990 and President Chamorro implemented a neoliberal model of development in the country, *campesinos* lost the land, union organization, and productive resources that had been available to them under the socialist Sandinista regime. The revolution had been unable to secure dignity for all poor people in Nicaragua, as it had promised. Any gains that *had* been made by the “dysfunctional, paternalistic state” created by the Sandinistas, Novoa explains, were no longer there to support rural farmers under the Chamorro regime. Thus, the Juan XXIII Institute changed its strategy to fill this gap in development. As it began to work more intensively and directly with communities in a model of sustainable development, and as the Nicaraguan government's policies became more conservative, student participation in the institute's programs fell completely away. Similar to its earlier years, the Juan XXIII Institute today aims to bring affordable housing, development, and health to poor communities in Nicaragua through social action that enables the most vulnerable sectors of the population to create social justice for themselves. Its housing and health initiatives have reached 400,000 people, and have contributed to sustainable development in Nicaragua. In its efforts to meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations in Nicaragua, however, it no longer includes students.

The value of solidarity was an important part of the years that students and other youth were engaged in the improvement of the conditions of Nicaragua's poor. Does this rhetoric of solidarity hold meaning for Nicaraguan youth today?

Today at the UCA: Youth Engagement in Social Justice

Current students at the UCA are not as involved as their parents were in service, solidarity, and social justice. Padre Cardenal thinks that it is because their parents became disillusioned with the vision of the Sandinistas as the Sandinista regime itself failed to meet the needs of the people. Other interviewees suggested it is because students at the UCA are more privileged, and therefore disinterested. Others believe that it is not an issue specifically affecting students at the UCA, but that more Nicaraguan youth in general live comfortably and are therefore more apathetic towards the issues that their country faces. Students' political attitudes are “indifferent,” according to sociology student Jorge Guerra. Some are even “afraid” to critique the university because they are attending with the help of scholarships—about 60% of UCA students receive scholarships—and “when it comes to making a polite critique of the university, they do not feel that they have the right to do so,” Guerra says.

For Padre Cardenal, Nicaraguan young people are experiencing a crisis because they are no longer involved in politics. Their parents were disillusioned by the corruption of the Sandinista government, the deaths caused by the revolution, and the failure of the Sandinista regime. Around 2009, Padre Cardenal was in Spain for a speaking engagement, and he was asked, “How do you keep hope with the political disillusion [that has developed in Nicaragua] during the last few years?” He responded:

I thought about this idea. This idea is very tangible. And the youth give me hope. I have worked with the youth. Before the Crusade, when there was so much fighting against Somocismo, I saw strength in the youth, a capacity of love and heroism. So I said one sentence: *I hope that the youth return to the streets to make history...* When I returned to

Managua, there was so much traffic. Somebody was preparing a campaign and had put up propaganda on a billboard. But someone had taken black spray paint and written over it, "I hope that the youth return to the streets to make history."

Some youth responded to Padre Cardenal's call for youth involvement. Some benefited from their parents' participation in the literacy campaigns and thus were taught that a strong commitment to solidarity and social justice is important. Interviewed Jesuits and professors at the UCA, however, see the response of students to social justice issues as underwhelming.

Professors like Padre Cesar Sosa, a Jesuit priest who teaches Philosophy at the UCA, cite a lack of interest in social justice, rather than disillusionment, as a factor that keeps students from engaging in social justice work. University students grow up more comfortable and more distanced from issues such as poverty and inequality. When the Social Service curriculum component (discussed later) was introduced to all majors at the UCA, there were students who opposed learning through service-learning courses. "We pay for professors to give classes. We don't pay to be sent into the streets with the poor," a group of students told the Social Service Program Coordinator, Gaston Ortega. However, Professor Ruth Orozco, who teaches accounting, noticed the opposite trend in student involvement in her department: her students are more empathetic to the needs of the poor. This is because accounting students at the UCA come from similar backgrounds as those that they serve for their class projects. "This major has the most students with scholarships in the UCA," Professor Orozco explained. "They are sensitive towards poverty."

Social Responsibility of the University

Whether it is because students are disillusioned or apathetic towards injustice, there is a perceived lack of discourse and activity around social justice and solidarity among the student body. Few students are motivated to dedicate time to social service on their own. Partially in response to this lack of motivation, the university created the Social Service program in 2013, adding several required service-learning courses to all undergraduate major curricula. The Social Service Program is driven by AUSJAL's Social Responsibility Policy, which calls on each of its member Jesuit universities to respond to social problems in the context of its Ignatian identity. The policy is inspired by the radical affirmation of human dignity valued in Roman Catholicism (Gargantini, Palacios, & Zaffaroni, 2009, p. 11-12). Through solidarity, AUSJAL member universities are expected to help students and communities learn how political power, economic resources, and knowledge must be used to support human dignity and transform Latin American societies (Gargantini et al., 2009, p. 13).

El seis por ciento is another reason that the social responsibility of the university is taken so seriously. *El seis por ciento* is a controversial budget allocation that sends six percent of the national budget to universities—almost half of the thirteen percent of the total national budget that goes to education (Sánchez Sancho, 2012). The UCA receives a part of this budget allocation. In a country where only about 17 percent of students continued learning in higher education in 2012, a common sentiment is that universities have a duty to society if they receive such a large portion of the education budget (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics, 2012). Padre Sosa asserts that this is where a university's social responsibility is derived. Jorge Ernesto Guerra, a Sociology student, disagrees; he regards *el seis por ciento* "as a social right to students" that does not factor in to the UCA's duty to society. Faculty members like Padre Sosa and Gaston Ortega see the social responsibility of the UCA as a fundamental duty to educate students to serve others and respond to the needs of their country. Several programs at the UCA take the different justifications for a policy of Social Responsibility into account in various ways. Some involve or

¹ "The six percent"

affect more students than others, but all play a role in increasing the social consciousness of the student body.

Social Service

Servicio Social, or Social Service, is part of the curriculum for all undergraduate students at the UCA. Tailored to the needs of each of the UCA's 19 majors, Social Service is implemented in several courses through a student's degree in which the professor teaches through service-learning methodologies. Service-learning integrates learning about the required concepts for a student's professional field with serving marginalized local communities (Perez et al., 2013, p. 96). Students engage with social injustices in the field in which they are studying, then learn about and discuss them in class. According to Ortega, the program "is an expression of the university's Social Responsibility." As the coordinator of the program, he aims to immerse students in the problems of their country during their experience of "academic and professional formation."

Social Service is implemented differently in each degree program; for example, architecture majors take courses about urban spaces, urban planning, and housing in Nicaragua. Beyond the university gates, students in the urban planning classes propose realistic, cost-effective ways to transform small city spaces. The students interact with community members in poor *barrios* and municipal officials through interviews, surveys, and meetings to create a feasible project for the city. In the classroom, students learn from community members who are invited to speak to students about the challenges in their communities, and students engage in class discussions to offer advice to and share their experiences with one another.

Accounting students experience Social Service through the private sector. Students complete their Social Service through courses called Research Techniques, Accounting of Costs I and Cost Systems I. Groups of students are paired with a *PYME*⁶ in a poor area. Students provide accounting services to these businesses and learn every facet of how the business operates and how much it costs to make a product. Their work empowers the businesses to make better financial decisions and helps the students learn to apply theories they learn in class to real situations. The accounting program also invites the businesses to several events at the university. Last year, it hosted a product fair where community partners brought the products that students had learned how to produce and sell, and people from all parts of the UCA attended and purchased their products. At the end of the semester, the program invited students in service-learning classes, their professors, and the business-owners to a closing ceremony. All students received certificates of participation, and professors received certificates for teaching a service-learning course. According to Professor Orozco, the businesses also received "service received" certificates to provide on applications for financial grants. The most outstanding and collaborative group of students also received an award. These events recognized the importance of social learning and its benefits for both students and small businesses in poor areas.

For the Social Service curriculum in the philosophy major, UCA students teach high school students about philosophy one morning per week. The student teachers are challenged to make learning about abstract theories accessible and enjoyable to teenagers at public schools run by *Fe y Alegría*. They meet in class to reflect on the content of their teaching and how their service

⁶ PYME = SME, or small to medium-sized enterprise

⁷ "Fe y Alegría is an International Movement of Popular Education and Social Promotion based on the values of justice, participation, fraternity, respect for diversity and solidarity, focused on impoverished and excluded populations, in order to contribute to the transformation of society." ("Mission and Vision," *Fe y Alegría*, <http://www.feyalegria.org/en/about-us/mission-vision>).

contributed to their personal formation. Students learn about pedagogy, synthesis, and societal transformation.

According to Padre Cesar Sosa, S.J., a philosophy professor who teaches Social Service courses for philosophy students, students gain new perspectives as they experience backgrounds different from their own, albeit only for a few hours a week. Gaston Ortega agreed; he hopes that Social Service and service-learning make all students more sensitive to the problems faced by Nicaragua's most vulnerable areas. Students themselves have varying views about the Social Service curriculum. Some students did not credit it with having an impact beyond their coursework on their personal formation, as their professors had hoped. Three accounting students who were interviewed did not believe that it affected their development as Nicaraguan citizens; they considered their service important for understanding social problems and completing class assignments, but not as something that would continue to affect them beyond their service-learning course. Others students saw Social Service as a way to improve and practice the skills that they learn in the classroom for their careers in their field of study. All of the students who were interviewed could agree, however, that service-learning is a way of helping and understanding those who are disadvantaged in Nicaraguan society—the primary goal of the Social Service program.

Youth Researchers

Jóvenes Investigadores, or “Youth Researchers,” is a research program that involves 100 students from the UCA from different majors. The program has been implemented in several service-learning courses at the UCA that are part of the Social Service curriculum, but students can also participate in the program as an extracurricular activity. Youth Researchers introduces students to social justice and human rights issues that are related to the environment, especially the way impoverished *recicladores*, or “waste pickers,” experience the current waste and recycling system in Nicaragua. Students investigate the socioeconomic and health conditions of *recicladores* as part of an initiative with NGOs, government organizations, and the Network of Nicaraguan Recycling Entrepreneurs (REDNICA) to design programs and projects that strengthen the social and productive sectors of poor communities. Students are engaged throughout the research process in crucial roles as researchers. According to the founder of *Jóvenes Investigadores*, Professor Martha Rizos, and Faculty Coordinator Professor Kathy Murrillos, most of Nicaragua's research about recycling has been quantitative; but *Jóvenes Investigadores* “looks for the personal part” of recycling by talking to the people who are actually living the process for qualitative research results. Students' research is based around the question, “How do we create an inclusive recycling system in Nicaragua?”

Similar to Social Service, Youth Researchers enhances students' professional development, develops their research skills, and teaches them about the environment; but it does much more. As Professor Murrillos offers, “It changes their views on reality... when we are having a meeting about it, they talk about the problems in our country and how they are living the experience. It changes their lives.” Joseling Murillo, a marketing student and the student coordinator of Youth Researchers, agreed: “It is not just forming our education in a theoretical way... we become conscious of the situation. As Marketing students, we have the most contact with people, so we learn about how we must relate to people and see how to fulfill their needs.” Youth Researchers in particular helps students learn research methods such as surveys and interviews that they can apply to their academics and professional lives. The program has also helped Murillo learn about social justice; in particular, it has given her a concern for the rights of the *recicladores* and the importance of people understanding their own human rights. The program is another way for students to engage in social justice and see different realities of life in Nicaragua.

Campus Ministry

La Pastoral Universitaria, or the UCA's Office of Campus Ministry, offers students many options

to get involved in social justice on and off campus. Some programs may prepare students for their professional lives when they work with populations similar to those that they serve, and all of the programs are ways for students to learn and to see the “social reality” of Nicaragua, said Moises Lopez, the Director of Volunteering in Campus Ministry. Campus Ministry has nine programs, most of which run on a weekly basis. Many of the volunteer opportunities involve providing accompaniment and educational activities to vulnerable groups in Managua, such as children with disabilities, incarcerated men and women, street children, children from low-income families who live near the UCA or whose parents are employed by the UCA, at-risk girls at a nearby high school, and children with serious illnesses. Campus Ministry also has an environmental group for students, *Voluntariado Ambiente*, for students interested in teaching their peers about environmental issues. In a weekly meeting that I attended with Lopez, students met planned an educational recycling campaign and began designing a university vegetable garden.

Jesuit Service for Migrants

El Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes, or the Jesuit Service for Migrants, conducts research and social analysis about migrant populations in Central America and offers legal help and socio-pastoral counseling to migrants and their families. Their *Documentos sin fronteras* (Documents without Borders) project processes the migration documents for Nicaraguans living in Costa Rica in partnership with the Jesuit Service for Migrants in Costa Rica. The Nicaraguan office for *el Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes* is on the campus of the UCA, where students may intern for the organization. Jorge Guerra, an intern for the organization, explained that interns learn how to perform community assessments and interpret the results, conduct structured interviews of families of migrants who remain in Nicaragua and community leaders, and immerse themselves in the issue of migration on the community level.

The Political Context of Student Engagement Today

Students are less politically involved today at the UCA than they were in past years. This is, firstly, because no political action is stemming from their class discussions. The university receives funding from the government, so several interviewees said that students feel discouraged from discussing politics in a critical manner in the classroom; but it was unclear by whom. Padre Sosa said that discussing his political opinions in class could cause problems for him and his students. According to Jorge Guerra, some students who receive scholarships also do not understand that they are still allowed to politically critique the university and the government. These limits stunt the potential that social analysis and discussion have to affect students’ actions on politics and social justice beyond the classroom. Due to the political nature of social justice issues such as housing and education in Nicaragua’s Sandinista government, students’ ability to discuss politics seems connected to their understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized communities in their country.

These limits on dialogue in and about education are reflected in other places as well, not only in class. Dr. Rafael Lucio Gil, Director of the Education Institute at the Universidad Centroamericana, which often conducts research for the Ministry of Education, explained that the Minister of Education herself, Miriam Raudez, struggles to maintain transparency. She does not give press conferences, and educational experts find it difficult to contact her. Anything that the Nicaraguan people know about the Ministry of Education is from the fifteen-minute speeches that Rosario Murillos, the wife of current President Daniel Ortega, gives each day. According to Dr. Gil, the Ministry of Education does not prioritize teaching students to think critically and from multiple perspectives about the world around them. Yet another factor limits student discussion about politics: the UCA itself. On October 28, 2008, students from the National Union of Nicaraguan Students (UNEN), a Sandinista student

• “Environmental Volunteers”

organization, and opposing UCA students clashed violently in protests at the UCA. UNEN members entered the Faculty of Law and assaulted several students in the classroom who did not agree with changing the leadership of UNEN. The building was evacuated, three students were injured and classes were cancelled for the day (Rivas, 2008). Weeks later, the eventual re-election of César Pérez, the current president of UNEN, sparked further violence at the UCA in December of the same year. Dissenting student leaders of the UNEN protested Pérez' re-election on December 11; as they saw it, the 40-year-old was no longer able to represent the interests of the students. They also were angry about corruption in UNEN's Congress. In order to prevent further violence, the university implemented heightened security measures at their gates: only people with university ID cards were able to enter. These security measures were still in place in August 2014. To counter the UCA's response, UNEN leaders called for the suspension of the UCA's *seis por ciento* grant ("Surge," 2008), prompting the rectors of other universities to declare their support for the UCA and its right to continue receiving government funding (Navarro, 2008). As mentioned earlier, *el seis por ciento* is a controversial budget allocation that sends six percent of the national budget, or nearly half of Nicaragua's total budget for education, to institutes of higher learning (Sánchez Sancho, 2012).

After these events, the UCA also limited the activities of political organizations on campus. To protect the safety of its students, the UCA's administration prevents engagement in political activities that may turn violent. Moreover, during August 2014, students were still largely uninvolved in the decision-making process about how to use the funds from *el seis por ciento* in 2014, despite the fact that the budget allocation played a large role in the protests. Students sometimes make efforts to create politically informed organizations, but these efforts are met with difficulty. Because of this, according to sociology student Jorge Ernesto Guerra, "there are no active, dynamic, independent organizations that are going to propose that students participate in the decisions about the management of public resources. What is more, there is a block on this." These limits create yet another obstacle for dialogue on campus about politics and broader social justice issues.

In addition, the rhetoric of solidarity in Nicaragua seems to have evolved. While it was taken to heart during the National Literacy Crusades, it may have new significance for Nicaraguans today, especially those who do not identify with the actions and aims of the Sandinista Party. In public city spaces and highways, one can find billboards and even park benches with the slogan of Sandinista President Daniel Ortega's third term: "*Nicaragua Cristiana Socialista Solidaria!*"⁹ For Nicaraguans who do not support the current government, perhaps solidarity no longer has the positive connotations it had in the 1980s when the Sandinista Revolution seemed as if it could indeed guarantee dignity and basic human rights for all Nicaraguans.

Finally, interviewed professors were worried both about students being discouraged from discussing the political situation in Nicaragua and about how well the UCA is forming students into professionals with a social conscience. If students feel unwelcome to discuss politics, it is not likely that they will enthusiastically engage in dialogue about the social justice issues that relate to politics. Students may feel committed to service, but if they are not discussing and understanding the issues on a more structurally complex level, they will not be equipped to work towards transforming the injustices they encounter as they work in disadvantaged communities. Daunting problems like inadequate housing, poor sanitation, low standards of education, and other poverties faced by disadvantaged rural and urban communities in Nicaragua will not be approached by young people who do not feel confident in their abilities to understand the issues beyond tragic statistics. It is clear from the factors that prevent political

⁹ "Christian and Socialist Nicaragua in Solidarity!" (the direct English translation for the adjective version of solidarity is "solidary," but it is not commonly used as such.)

discourse on campus that apathy is not the only thing inhibiting student engagement in social justice.

Do Students at the UCA think critically about Their Involvement in Social Justice?

Eight students were formally interviewed for this project, and they were asked one or more of the following questions to demonstrate the ways that they think about social justice:

1. One buzzword that the university uses is the “Social Responsibility of the University.” What does social responsibility mean to you?
2. Do you think that the social responsibility of the university is connected to social justice?
3. How do you define social justice?
4. How does the program [that you are involved in] affect your development or identity as a Nicaraguan citizen?

Their responses varied in complexity and detail. Most students were not very familiar with the academic discourse around the concept of social justice, but they were able to offer their own informal, thoughtful definition relating to their own social justice work. For example, architecture student Harry Lopez Novoa broke down the phrase “social justice” into two parts: laws (justice) and societal issues such as poverty and indifference. He thought that an integrated approach to these two things could lead to equality, and that “doing something for others”—or, fulfilling one’s social responsibility—completed the idea of social justice.

Cynthia Rodriguez is an economics major who was not involved in social justice through the UCA but was involved in TECHO, a youth-led organization that collaborates with families living in poverty throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to overcome poverty in slums through housing projects (“What is Techo,” n.d.). She was the only student who discussed solidarity in her interview. This may correspond to the fact that, in Nicaragua, TECHO is an organization that often attracts youth who are the children of *brigadistas* and other former youth volunteers from the national literacy campaigns. Its core values and approaches are influenced by the experiences of the youth volunteers from the late 1980s, and students whose families participated in the campaigns of that time are familiar with those values, which have been passed on from parents to children.

While most of the students had considered how their service affected their future, the three Accounting students who were interviewed together did not think that their experiences serving a PYME had anything to do with their identities as Nicaraguan citizens, although they did find the work important for their course. These three students saw themselves as representatives of the UCA in the context of the university’s social responsibility to the community that they were serving. On the other hand, another student who felt more strongly attached to the concept of social justice in relation to his service-learning explained that he did not think that the UCA was informing students about the Social Service program and the service-learning requirement enough. He wanted to see more details about the development of the program.

All of the students interviewed discussed how important it was to see “realities” other than their own. In fact, rather than talking about social “problems” or “challenges,” each of them used the term “reality” to discuss the experiences of people they served and their own experiences. All of the interviewed students recognized the importance of immersion in other ways of life to understand what it is like “in someone else’s shoes.” Joseling Murillo, the Youth Researchers Student Coordinator, explained that through her research about *recicladores* in rural areas, she began to view the realities of others in a different light:

It was a wonderful experience because we became conscious of the reality that many people live in. Sometimes we ignore the work that these people do, but we got to see how important they are, because they are people who are helping the environment in one way or another. This is also a form of survival for them.

Herdy Bravo, a philosophy student at the UCA, believed this so strongly that he took a year off from classes at the UCA to teach philosophy and sociology at a high school in Chinandega, a rural, mountainous region of Nicaragua. He saw it as a way to seriously learn about development issues without looking at people as statistics, and to experience what it is like to be a teacher. While he agreed that his unique service-learning experience is an important part of his education, he did not like the un-altruistic connotation of social responsibility:

I think that when you say 'social responsibility' ... you realize that you can do something, and that you are ethically obligated to. You have to learn and you have to move, because you are reading about the problem or seeing the problem in the news... [Social responsibility] is not discursive, it is not about talking about it; it has to be a personal experience. I don't like saying 'responsibility' because it makes it sound guilty, like an ethical duty... It has implications of guilt. But to help because of guilt—I don't know how to say it; I guess it is not healthy.

Murillo saw social responsibility in a more positive light, but it was clear that she had also thought about it critically:

Social responsibility is to do [service] and to do it continually... If you aren't doing it constantly, it is not social responsibility; it is philanthropy... I believe that the university is truly fulfilling its social responsibility because it is continually carrying out its activities. Not only do they benefit; we benefit as students—and if we can, we make it benefit others as well.

Students who voluntarily engaged in research and literature around the social justice issues that they were working in seemed to think more critically about their service. Jorge Guerra, for example, deeply analyzed the social problems that he encountered in his research at the Jesuit Service for Migrants:

Migration, yes, it is a problem in this country. But it is not manifest; it is not evident either to other citizens, the government, or the public policies of this country. So [the internship] helps me to know a problem that I did not even know was a problem, and that is very much related to the economic situations that many inhabitants in this country are living in... Immigration is a collective problem; if we are going to be more global, be a generation of capitalism, and [continue] the tendency of accumulation of wealth and [the pattern] of central nations and periphery nations.

Despite the fact that students did not discuss these social justice issues and the political challenges that were connected to them more intensely and critically in classroom settings, the interviewed students who were voluntarily involved in social justice thought more critically about the issues in which they were engaged. The students did not echo Padre Sosa's concerns about the lack of political classroom dialogue. Their responses seemed to reflect that formal dialogue about social justice is indeed lacking, but not informal discussions amongst classmates.

Conclusions

The UCA's various social justice initiatives affect the education of its students in varying ways. The service-learning requirement gives students a new sense of what poverty means and a broader perspective about social issues in Nicaragua. Other more intensive internships and research positions allow students to immerse themselves in a specific issue and develop skills that can be applied to both their service work and their field of study. This second kind of initiative, where students voluntarily engaged in social justice work, seemed to more consistently have a strong impact on students; with this in mind, it is important for the UCA to support the efforts of smaller programs to generate interest amongst students. A main challenge to these programs is the "crisis amongst young people" that Padre Cardenal, Padre Sosa and Jorge Guerra discussed: students are apathetic about social justice issues and feel discouraged

from speaking about politics. A culture of student engagement might be fostered amongst students to reverse these issues. A university with students who are enthusiastic about engagement would encourage civil dialogue about social justice and related political issues in and outside of the classroom. With more events similar to the Accounting and Finance Department's end-of-social-service celebration and Product Fair, students could be welcomed to share their social justice work and reach a wider audience within the university. With the Social Service program, the UCA is on a path towards fostering this dialogue in the classroom, at the least.

At the time of writing, the Social Service Program is still only about a year old. As the program gets older, it will be useful to create evaluation methods such as surveys of community members, students, and professors to see if it is influencing students' understanding of social justice concepts and their post-graduation plans. It is also important to take extra steps to ensure that students are stepping out of their comfort zones and learning. With all students taking classes for this compulsory curriculum, it is inevitable that some will require an extra push to engage with the issues and remain open to new ideas. One way to approach this challenge is through reflection and discussion in class inspired by Ignatian spirituality. It seemed that some Departments succeeded in including this reflective element, while others did not. The shape the UCA's service-learning curriculum takes over the next few years, and its impact on students, could be a source of discussion for Jesuit universities, such as Georgetown, with growing social justice pedagogy programs.

Gianna Maita is an undergraduate student at Georgetown University. Email: gnm2@georgetown.edu.

References

- Barrios de Chamorro, V., & Cruz de Baltodano, S. (1996). *Dreams of the heart: The autobiography of President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of Nicaragua*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.
- Belli, G. (2003). *The country under my skin: A memoir of love and war*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Gargantini, D., Palacios, A., & Zaffaroni, C. (2009). *Políticas y sistema de autoevaluación y gestión de la responsabilidad social universitaria en AUSJAL*. Córdoba, Spain: Red RSU - Asociación de Universidades Jesuitas de Latinoamérica – AUSJAL.
- Lankshear, C. (1993). Adult literacy in Nicaragua 1979-90. In P. Freebody, A. R. Welch (Eds.), *Knowledge, culture and power: International perspectives on literacy as policy and practice* (pp. 116-144). Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Merrill, T. (1993). *Nicaragua: A country study*. Washington, D.C.: GPO for the Library of Congress. Retrieved from <http://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/>
- Miller, V. (1985). *Between struggle and hope: The Nicaraguan literacy crusade*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Navarro, A. (2008, Oct 31). Rectores universitarios desestiman intenciones de UNEN. *El Nuevo Diario*. Retrieved from <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/especiales/31129>
- Pérez Díaz, M. L., Alberto Idiáquez, P. J., Rodrigues, R., Uriarte, R., & Solis, V. A. (2013). *Líneamientos del servicio social del pregrado*. Managua, Nicaragua: Universidad Centroamericana.
- Rivas, L. (2008, Oct 28). Suspenden clases en la UCA por trifulca Sandinista. *El Nuevo Diario*.

Retrieved from <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/economia/30842>

Sánchez Sancho, L. (2012, May 10). La discusión del 6 por ciento universitario. *La Prensa*. Retrieved from <http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2012/05/10/opinion/100952-la-discusion-del-6-por-ciento-universitario>

Surge Conflicto Entre Lideres Estudiantiles Nicaraguenses. (2008, Dec 11). *NOTIMEX*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/news/docview/428633503/C2E858F3270C4DF8PQ/1?accountid=11091>

United States Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (2012). *Country profiles: Nicaragua*. Retrieved from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/>

TECHO. (2014). *What is Techo? / History*. Retrieved from <http://www.techo.org/>