

My leadership in action experience in Medellin, Colombia, was focused around community mobilization in a rural community of displaced individuals called El Faro. The decades-long Colombian conflict has seen many human casualties and internally displaced migrants: many that made their way to urban centers to flee the violence of the countryside. One such settlement that formed as a result of these migratory processes was the neighborhood of El Faro, located on the mountainous slopes of Medellin's outskirts. The community lacks access to public services due to its unrecognized status, and thus is forced to exercise its own sovereignty in water, food, and security matters.

Our role in this project was to advance community mobilization to support community initiatives (such as a community garden and agro-forest) and to break down the rural-urban barriers within Medellin. This is significant as affluent areas of the city are secluded (either voluntarily, through municipal policy, or indirect methods) from its more rural and less developed neighborhoods. As a result, the students of the university (UPB) that we were planning to recruit as volunteers had little experience in such communities despite living within the same city. Our project not only aimed to improve the living standards of El Faro residents and engage them in community activities to work on their projects, but also to galvanize the student population of UPB to take their own independent action on these communities through direct experience in working in one.

The main leadership themes I would like to highlight in this reflection are resilience. Much like the social resilience shown by the city of Medellin in overcoming their difficult past, our project was forced to cope with the burdens of administrative apathy, time constraints, and safety concerns that adjusted the scope of our project far beyond our initial conception.

Our group faced a number of challenges in attempting to achieve the goals stipulated in the introduction. For starters, our project initially suffered from a lack of direction after meeting with *El Derecho a no Obedecer*, a local NGO we were partnering with to complete this project. They informed us on the first day that our project was a done deal: we only needed to recruit warm-blooded humans to join them in their *convite* at El Faro on a pre-planned date where all of the tools and arrangements had already been made. In making this assertion, we as a group were forced to devise ways to improve on this model by engaging our student volunteers in other ways beyond the pre-planned activities on August 13th. We did this by consulting our mentors in makesense, bouncing ideas off of one another, going to the administration at UPB for potential support, and other efforts to broaden the scope of our project. We wanted to have a meaningful impact during the course of our six weeks in the city.

Another challenge we faced was apathy from the university administration. Our project was initially conceived as a student club that would continue to sustainably support El Faro's

community initiatives and act as a bridge between the urban and rural portions of the city, similar to extracurricular clubs in our home universities. But what we found was that at UPB, there was no infrastructure to support student volunteers or a student club that we were envisioning. We attempted to secure volunteer credit recognition from the deans of the university, but were dismissed on grounds of potential safety issues of the upper-middle class students of UPB traveling to a rural community where potential kidnappings and crime could befall them. So we were forced to scale down the concept of a student organization and focus on providing our volunteers various pathways to continue their interest and support for El Faro: through research opportunities with Professor Denise Maria Roca-Servat (an academic who studies El Faro and other cases of political ecology) and activism pathways (through *El Derecho a no Obedecer*).

The impact we hoped to have was twofold: a direct positive impact on the livelihoods of El Faro residents by providing our physical efforts in assisting the preparation and planting of crops in the agroforest and community garden; the additional provision of construction supplies and tools to complete additional community projects to serve as a space to engage the residents of El Faro. We also wanted to impact the student volunteers who were working alongside us during this period: allowing them to experience a Medellin beyond their bubble of urban affluence and giving them access to various ways to sustain their interest in social causes, either through activism or further academic research.

Throughout this project I was placed into an environment outside of my comfort zone: my grasp on the Spanish language was tested at every turn and I will admit that the sense of culture shock was overwhelming at times. Beyond the adjustment period to a new country, however, I was also prompted to actively communicate, problem solve, negotiate, and take novel approaches throughout the course of the project. Our team of three (Hannah, Lia, and myself) were all from different backgrounds with differing personalities and skill sets. In going through this experience with them, I was able to improve on my **communication** skills (in English and muddled Spanish), and exercise a degree of **teamwork** with previously unfamiliar individuals. Our project ran into the many hurdles detailed above, and these required creative **problem-solving** skills that forced us to **approach the issues in new ways**.

It was strange to find myself, for the first time in my life, placed into the category of absolute minority. The majority Hispanic Medellin had a noticeable lack of Asians, and even fewer Koreans. I would constantly find myself being stared at in public, most likely out of curiosity rather than malice, and asked if I was either Japanese, Chinese, or Korean. It was amusing at first, but sticking out like a sore thumb for six weeks certainly required a degree of adjustment that I had never had to exercise in my life thus far.

My trip in Colombia also offered opportunities to exercise cultural sensitivity: specifically in my attempts to communicate to native Spanish speakers among our volunteer group.

Although the conversations between myself and Isai—one of our volunteers with a less developed grasp on English—were short, I found myself listening more and putting in additional effort to understand what he was diligently attempting to communicate to me. Every time his message would get through we would have a simultaneous moment of understanding: something that I take for granted given my usual lack of language barriers back in English-speaking Toronto.

My team members were fantastic, and I believe that I would have been entirely incapacitated during these six weeks without their assistance in this project. Hannah, although lacking prior Spanish experience, was a diligent team player who would take the chance to be our sanity check for any ideas that seemed out of reach. Lia, our most experienced Spanish speaker, was a social butterfly that easily mingled with our volunteers and became the face of our three-person team. Our team chemistry flowed well as all three of us had agreeable personalities and skill sets that meshed well with each other: rarely overstepping any bounds or coming to emotional disagreements that were present in some of the other groups. If I were compelled to do this all over, I could not have picked a better team.

In conclusion, my journey in Medellin and the project to assist El Faro will occupy a significant place in my memories. It goes without saying that a six-week endeavor in a foreign country came with its own hardships, but I was glad to have worked with the people I did on an initiative that will benefit the residents of El Faro.

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