

Introduction

I spent my Leadership in Action summer working alongside rural communities in Oaxaca, Mexico. Tejiendo Alianzas is a small nonprofit that provides resources to local artisans and businesses in order to encourage cultural and economic sovereignty.

Oaxaca currently faces extremely high poverty rates, particularly in rural areas while urban centers see uneven economic growth due to increasing tourism. Rising temperatures and changes in weather patterns due to climate change have introduced new environmental challenges to farmers already working in arid, drought-prone regions.

I worked with Tejiendo Alianzas on a new project introducing sustainable agricultural methods to rural farming families. I researched a particular model focusing on agave and mesquite permaculture to take advantage of the growing mezcal industry centered in rural Oaxaca.



Leading in Mexico

Through the challenges I faced in Mexico, I learned how to use humility to become a more aware and empathetic leader. While I initially felt unprepared for my environmental research, and nervous about working in a new community and in a new language, I learned that I did not have to get over this discomfort before taking on a leadership role in my project. Instead, I learned how to use this curiosity and these questions to adapt my leadership and my decision-making to better reflect the people I worked alongside.

Reflecting on Systems Change

I learned through this project that large scale systems change and grassroots community-level change are not mutually exclusive. Our work dealt with overlapping environmental, economic, and cultural systems in Mexico, but our project also had to adapt to very specific circumstances for individual families. I learned how to make connections between these two levels of change on my own in order to incorporate this insight into our project.

Character Development

Over my six weeks in Mexico, I spent time in incredibly diverse environments, differing in community traditions, cultures, and economic and environmental circumstances. This experience required me to develop my own skills in adaptability and intercultural communication in a new way, requiring me to consider not only my own cultural differences and those within Oaxaca. I developed a new sense of humanity and empathy, and a more nuanced understanding of justice. In new and uncomfortable situations, I had to question assumptions I had made about inequality, sovereignty, and sustainability.



Project Goals, Motivations, and Planning

Tierra del Sol: Data Collection and Cultural Integration

My project began with environmental data collection with Tierra del Sol, a local organization based in Oaxaca established by local environmental leader Pablo Lavalle. Tierra del Sol focuses on regenerative agriculture, environmental restoration, and water conservation. After a week of completing farmwork rotations to learn more about Tierra del Sol's operations, I completed scientific testing on the soil at various sites around the property. We used this data to support Tejiendo Alianzas' sustainable agriculture initiative, which seeks to expand Pablo's strategies to other nearby farming communities.

Oaxaca Centro: Data Analysis and Forward Thinking

The second half of my summer involved analyzing the data collected at Tierra del Sol and translating it into a proposal for potential donors and local partners. During this phase of the project, we focused on presenting our data to different audiences based on the resources we needed. This involved looking towards potential challenges that may arise in integrating these strategies in new communities, and adapting our project to unexpected results in our data.

San Dionisio and Ixcatlan: Adaptation and Community Outreach

The final phase of our project took place in surrounding communities. We used our new insight into sustainable agriculture practices in the region and the existing relationships between Tejiendo Alianzas and local families in order to build a network of potential participants and adapt our project plan to the needs and circumstances of these communities.

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