

Project Management Education Grows Green in Costa Rica

How Foreign Direct Investment and Sustainable Development Shaped Project Management Education at La Universidad para la Cooperación Internacional (UCI).

Established in April 1994, UCI is a private institution of higher learning based in San Jose, Costa Rica. UCI is a globally recognized educational leader in both sustainable/green development and project management. Through interviews with Professor William Ernest, PMP, International Programs Director and Professor of Project Management and Ramiro Fonseca Macrini, Dean of the Faculty of Project Management, this article will explore how Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and a unique ecological niche have shaped the development of UCI's project management education program.

BACKGROUND

FDI in Costa Rica

For most of its history, Costa Rica had an agricultural economy. Then, in 1996, Intel, the world's largest semiconductor company, announced that it was building a US\$300 million manufacturing facility in Costa Rica.

"In Costa Rica, there really are a 'Before Intel' and 'After Intel,'" said Professor Ernest, referring to the economic and social impacts of the largest private project in Costa Rica's history.¹ "In some ways, we went from being an agricultural economy to a service economy, without ever being an industrial one."

During the initial phases of Intel's Costa Rican venture, Robert Perlman, who, as Intel's Director of Finance, oversaw annual sales that were twice the size of Costa Rica's GDP,² likened the project to "putting a whale in a swimming pool."³ His statement, although humorous, would ultimately prove to be prophetic. Within a few short years, the resulting splash of this project would send waves surging outward across Costa Rica, changing its economy, culture and educational system.⁴ In fact, the splash would go far beyond the pool, as the investment's "Signaling Effect" would dramatically increase Costa Rica's global visibility as a prospect for foreign investment.⁵

Today, Costa Rica is the Latin American leader in FDI⁶ and is home to one of the world's Top 20 Emerging Economies.⁷ Its FDI portfolio, initially tech-heavy, featuring companies such as Intel, IBM and Hewlett Packard, has diversified to include global pharmaceutical companies such as Baxter, Hospira and Boston Scientific and consumer goods companies, such as Procter & Gamble.⁸

The country's ranking as one of the world's top destinations for outsourcing of service operations and information technology⁹ has also led to a thriving industry that provides outsourced specialized technical services¹⁰ and outsourced customer contact management to companies around the world.¹¹

The Need for Sustainable Development

Another key factor that has shaped UCI's project management offering is the emergence of sustainable or "green" development. According to the International Society of Sustainability Professionals (ISSP), the two professions are deeply interconnected; in a recent study, their members ranked project management as one of the three most important competencies for success.¹²

Sustainable development has never been more important. The recent United Nations' Conference on Sustainable Development (colloquially known as Rio+20) was the biggest conference in UN history,¹³ bringing together more than 45,000 people from around the world,¹⁴ including more than 100 heads of state¹⁵ and 1,500 CEOs from 60 nations.¹⁶

Costa Rica is a globally recognized leader and pioneer in sustainable development theory and practice,¹⁷ in part due to its unique ecological niche. Although the country is small, representing only about 0.1 percent of the world's landmass, it contains 5 percent of the world's biodiversity.¹⁸ This places it among the top 20 countries with the highest biodiversity in the world ... and makes it one of the world's top eco-tourism destinations, generating a massive US\$2 billion annually.¹⁹

Many in Costa Rica are fiercely protective of their rich natural heritage. More than one fourth of Costa Rica is under national park protection, and Costa Rica is one of the few countries in the world where the forest cover has actually doubled since the 1980s. It is also one of two developing nations in the world that has pledged to become carbon neutral by 2021.²⁰

ABOUT PROJECT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION AT UCI

Since its founding in 1999, the School of Project Management has graduated more than 1,500 students from 20 different countries and has become the largest school at UCI. According to Professor Ernest, the reason is simple. "Project management is a priority for us, because projects are the vehicle for change, and change is a constant in every economy. By teaching project management we are helping to foster change," he stated. "It doesn't matter what field you're in. If you're a leader, you will end up working in a project environment. In order to be successful in that environment, you need to understand how projects work."

UCI's approach to project management education includes a strong emphasis on sustainable development practices. "Our university is internationally recognized for its 'green vision,' and has been involved through the years in several initiatives, such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the Climate Project," said Dean Fonseca, who sees sustainable project management not as a hot trend, but as a global imperative. "Right now, we are at a point where we have to make changes to how we work, because there is no more time," he said. "We can't wait until we start running out of things, like water, before we make changes in how we manage projects."

While the majority of project management education courses are housed in the School of Project Management, project management courses can also be found in multiple disciplines at UCI, including its MBA program and school of legal science.

UCI also actively practices project management, with a large portfolio of projects conducted in collaboration with governments and NGOs from across the region. The volume and scale of these projects necessitated the establishment of a campus-wide project management office in 2002.

The Role of E-Learning:

Online learning is becoming increasingly important to colleges and universities. In fact, one recent study found that almost two thirds of reporting institutions defined online learning as a critical part of their long-term strategy.²¹

UCI is an experienced online educator, having first offered online courses in 2003. Today, all of UCI's academic programs have a strong online learning component. Traditional classroom methods have been augmented by a "blended learning" approach, where students can go online to receive additional support and resources through a virtual knowledge community.

"We believe in online education," said Professor Ernest. "We promote virtual learning environments. We think that we can teach project management or any of our programs to anyone who has an Internet connection."

Like many instructors, learning to effectively teach online required the mastering of new pedagogies. “I had never even been a student in a virtual program, and they were asking me to teach in one,” Professor Ernest said, who described the process as requiring him to both learn new concepts and relearn old ones. Once mastered, he found the online experience yielded unique opportunities. “It is amazing that I can interact with people from other cultures and other countries and share from my experiences within my career.”

ABOUT UCI’S AFFILIATION WITH PMI

According to Dean Fonseca, UCI’s affiliation with PMI was the result of a careful vetting process. “When we researched about our needs and desires for an association with which to align ourselves, PMI was the one that met our needs best,” he stated. “No one had the same reputation or structure of standards and levels of certification that PMI had.”

Ultimately this affiliation would be reflected in UCI seeking and attaining two critical PMI designations. In 2001, UCI became the first Latin American University to attain PMI Registered Education Provider (R.E.P.) status. Then, in 2009, UCI became the first Latin American University to have a degree program accredited by the PMI Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education (GAC).

GAC Accreditation

According to Dean Fonseca, who was involved in the GAC application effort, there were multiple reasons that inspired them to undertake what would become a year-long process. “The GAC’s reputation is the first thing that comes to mind,” he said. “The GAC is important. If we are recognized by someone like PMI for the quality of our programs, then that really says something to prospective students.”

The value of GAC accreditation as a recruiting tool was recently borne out by a UCI research study, which found that the majority of student respondents appreciated the international recognition of the program, and almost one third cited the GAC’s reputation as one of the program’s most meaningful advantages.²²

Other benefits cited were the programmatic and process improvements derived from completing the exacting GAC accreditation process. “We already had a long relationship with PMI, since our becoming an R.E.P. in 2001,” Dean Fonseca said. “But we wanted to improve our project management program even further.” The practical effect of this effort is also supported by UCI’s research, which found that 92 percent of the students rated the quality of the overall educational experience as either “good,” “very good” or “excellent.”²³

PMI Membership

UCI’s affiliation with PMI extends beyond the programmatic level to include student and faculty membership. Since 2010, all project management education students are enrolled as PMI members. According to Professor Ernest, membership makes it easier for students to access PMI’s standards and materials, while also providing opportunities for interaction and professional development. “I hear from our students that they find it interesting to be a part of the community of knowledge that PMI represents,” he stated. “Many of them find it valuable to be a part of PMI’s virtual communities, because they can interact with colleagues from all over the world and share resources for professional development.”

Professor Ernest also identified the opportunity for quality interaction as a key benefit of his own membership in PMI. “From my experience with other organizations, you get the feeling that you are just a reader, just a member, just a number,” he stated. “In PMI, you can be really involved in making things happen in the profession. For example, I have read and contributed to the latest draft of the *PMBOK® Guide*.²⁴ I think that opportunity is something that other organizations don’t give you. With PMI you are a real active member and can make your voice be heard.”

PMI Credentials

"The certifications that PMI provides are very important to us and to our students," said Dean Fonseca, who stated that the quality of PMI's credentials was one of the driving factors behind their desire to align their educational curriculum with PMI's standards.

Credential preparation is part of the foundation of their project management education program. The verified quality of UCI's GAC-accredited program enables program graduates to earn 1,500 hours of project management experience that can be applied toward the Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] credential and the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM)[®] certification.

"I always tell my students that they if they have the experience they should pursue the PMP[®] credential," stated Professor Ernest. "If they lack that experience, then they should look to the CAPM[®] certification," he said, noting that they are currently assembling a student group to sit for the CAPM.

Professor Ernest cited the credentials' widespread recognition as being of particular value to a virtual student body dispersed across countries and time zones. "Different countries and cultures may recognize academic titles and achievements differently," he stated, "but a PMI credential is recognized globally."

Local Volunteer Resources

Another benefit of PMI affiliation was the connection it facilitates with PMI chapters. UCI has a close relationship with their local chapter: members of the UCI faculty serve on the chapter's board and UCI often partners with the chapter on events and in projects. "UCI understands that the chapter is an extension of the work at the university," said Professor Ernest. "We understand that we are all working in the promotion of the profession; it is natural for us to be allies."

The chapter also plays a vital role in providing employment opportunities for students, due to its visibility as part of PMI. "If a company is just settling in the country and is looking for project managers," said Professor Ernest, "the first place they will look is the local chapter, because many of the companies already know about PMI."

THE FUTURE OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT AT UCI

Costa Rica's economy continues to grow, even in the global downturn that has slowed so many other countries. Not only did the first quarter GDP growth increase 6.9 percent over the prior year, foreign investment rose by 10.4 percent, and analysts project that Costa Rica's gross domestic product will grow by 5.5 percent for the rest of the year.²⁵

As the country grows, so does its need for project management education. UCI has an ambitious selection of new courses slated to launch in the first semester of 2013, including an associate degree in construction and short-term courses focusing on special applications of project management in the areas of IT and disaster relief.

Next year, UCI will even be launching its first online degree program in English: a Master's Degree in Project Management. According to Dean Fonseca, this program will get affordable project management education into the hands of the developing countries that need it most.

While the course offerings may evolve and change, the passionate belief behind them will not.

"We are not trying to change the world immediately or structurally," said Dean Fonseca. "Our mission is to change the people who receive our education so that they are able to think differently, and then to provide them with the knowledge and project management tools that enable them to act differently."

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