

# Changing Latitudes, Attitudes and Lives



Isamara Rodriguez, Victor Casas, Rosy Molina and Ranier Cervantes (left to right) from Tec de Monterrey attended UW-Parkside last year. Luis Lara is not pictured.

As the crow flies, it's about 1,600 miles from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside to Tec de Monterrey, Campus Laguna, a university in Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico. Drive time? Plan on about 48 hours – what with rest stops, gas stops, etc. For years, Tec de Monterrey has been sending students to study in the United States and other countries around the world.

According to Cecilia Sandoval, director of internationalization at Tec de Monterrey, the school has exchange agreements with more than 200 universities worldwide.

Sandoval said all exchange students are strong academically and also possess

solid leadership skills. "And before they depart from their home town, the students take a mandatory intercultural communications course," she said.

The first students from Mexico to take part in the exchange program at UW-Parkside were Rosy Molina, 22, a senior from Parras, Coahuila, and Isamara Rodriguez, 24, a senior from Mexico City. The two women arrived on campus in August 2000. "We were like the pioneers," Molina said. In January 2001, Molina and Rodriguez were joined by three classmates – Victor Casas, 22, a senior from Mexico City; Ranier Cervantes, 21, a senior from Torreon; and Luis Lara, 22, a senior from Durango, Durango.

Casas, Cervantes and Lara had plenty of questions before they arrived in Wisconsin and they knew where to find the answers. "We were in touch with Rosy by email to ask all the questions that came into our minds," Casas said.

The young women were happy to help. "They wanted to know what kind of clothes (to wear)," Molina recalled. "And we told them, 'Normal clothes, like jeans.' And they asked, 'No, no it's so cold ... are you sure people wear jeans?'"

Yes, even on the frozen tundra that is Wisconsin in January, people wear jeans.

When the three men arrived, the five quickly formed a bond. "We try to help each other," Rodriguez said. "People say,

'You are so friendly, you always try to help Victor.' Maybe it's because we are alone here and if we don't help each other, it's going to be harder."

And make no mistake about it, living in a different country -- a different culture -- is a challenge. Just being away from family and friends can be hard.



"At the beginning, it was difficult," Cervantes said. "But with time, I became accustomed to this type of life. I was always in communication with my family in Mexico. And it's not just your family that you miss. You miss your friends, too. Your friends are important. Here, Isamara, Rosy, Victor and Luis, we have become good friends and that has helped me."

Casas had a somewhat easier adjustment thanks to a summer he spent in Spain a few years ago. "One month in Spain and I started to miss my family," he said. "But now I'm in America and I'm not so far away. I keep in touch with my family by computer, by messenger, email, and sometimes on the phone."

The group stressed the importance of the family in Mexico. Casas described the family as the center of society. Cervantes said he received his values from his family.

"We are so close with our families, with our brothers and sisters," Rodriquez added. "For example, my dad is one of my best friends."

Casas found it a bit puzzling that some of his UW-Parkside classmates want to live away from their families. "Some people here, they live in the dorms and their families live in Racine or Kenosha. In my case, I'm going to live with my family," he said.

Molina added that in Mexico it's OK to be in college and still live with your family.

Aside from the social challenges, there are academic challenges. "In class, sometimes I didn't understand everything because the teacher would speak so fast," Casas continued. "But now I can understand more words, and maybe my (English) pronunciation isn't so good but people can understand me."

Rodriquez decided to take the academic challenge and -- as a famous TV chef would say -- kick it up a notch. "This past semester I took 21 credits," she said. "And when I told people I was taking 21 credits, they said, 'No, Isamara, you can't do it; you are crazy. This is not your country. It's a different language and it's too much for you.'"



Rodriquez, however, went ahead with her plan -- partly because she needed the credits to meet her goal for graduation. "I tried very hard and I think I did my best," she said. "First, I wanted to show myself that I could do it, and then show other people that I could do it."

For Cervantes, going to class meant more than just learning. "I wanted to give something extra to the class," he said. "I wanted to teach my classmates something about Mexico -- and I think I did that."

Casas tried to change the image some Americans have of Mexican men. "Some people feel like Mexican guys are, I mean, not bad, but they don't think we know what type of clothes to wear or that we don't know how to use laptops or cal-

culators. It's because they know another kind of Mexican people from television and movies."

Learning and teaching are two very different things. The interesting part is that they must occur simultaneously in any truly valuable, interactive educational experience. The experience at UW-Parkside was valuable for both the Tec de Monterrey students and people with whom they came in contact.

Molina said she enjoyed being at UW-Parkside because of the new people she met -- including a few from her home country. "I didn't know Isamara; and I can tell you I made a friend who is like a sister," she said. "I met other friends, too, who are very close with me."

"And you see more -- you have a larger view of what and who you are in Mexico. You see that there is something else, something more -- it's not like it is just your life, you see there are more lives in different parts of the world."

"And, really, here in America they have a view of Mexico that is not very nice. So, I tried to change that. And I think I did -- at least with my friends -- I changed the view they have of Mexico."



Casas said he enjoyed the opportunity to see the American culture for himself, versus what he had been exposed to in Mexico. "This experience is going to be very helpful for my entire life because I have learned many things," he said. "First, I learned more English. If you want to learn any language, you have to go to that country and you can improve very quickly."

Rodriguez called her experience at UW-Parkside, "Awesome." She said meeting different people exposed her to new ideas and different points of view. "And to live in a different country," she continued, "it makes you change your mind – a lot. I want to take the things that I have learned at UW-Parkside to my country and I know I can do something good for my country."

For Cervantes, studying in a different country was something he never imagined he would do. "To come (to UW-Parkside), I had to do many things and it was hard for me," he said. "And now that I am here, I'm enjoying it and doing all the things I wanted to do in school: to get to know people; to study hard; and to see another academic system."

"The experience is going to help me in the future. If you know different people,

they can help you. This experience is one I will never forget. It has changed my mind, my life – I think my vision of life."

When Casas, Cervantes and Lara were getting ready to venture north, they relied on Molina and Rodriguez (the pioneers) to help prepare them for the experience. Now it's time for the three young men to help others. "The students who are coming next semester," Cervantes said, "they've emailed us, asked us about the system, the food – so we're helping them."

Rodriguez, however, has a warning for newcomers: the added responsibility that comes with studying in another country. "When I left, my mom said, 'Isamara, the image you're going to show people will

not be Isamara's image, it will be Mexico's image. Everything that you do is going to be Mexico's image.' She was right because people wouldn't say, 'There's Isamara,' they would say, 'There's the girl from Mexico.'"

Even with all the challenges and hard work, the group agreed that the rewards of studying in another country are well worth the effort. And they strongly encourage students at UW-Parkside to consider a year in Mexico.



"Don't even think that, 'Oh, it's going to be so hard and I don't speak Spanish very well,'" Molina said. "No way! You have to forget about all that and just go and you are going to learn a lot. Not just for your studies or your major, but for your life."

For additional information about study-abroad opportunities at UW-Parkside, please contact the Center for International Studies, Molinaro 367, (262) 595-2701; co-director Professor Peggy James (262) 595-2101 or Theron P. Snell in the Advising Center, 107A Molinaro, (262) 595-2041.

Cecilia Sandoval (left), director of Internationalization at Tec de Monterrey, talks with Rosy Molina and Isamara Rodriguez.