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# Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education

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Service-Learning at Universities: The case of  
Educational social practices at the University  
of Buenos Aires

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>16. Service-Learning at Universities: The case of Educational social practices at the University of Buenos Aires</b> .....	308
María Catalina Nosiglia	
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## 16. SERVICE-LEARNING AT UNIVERSITIES: THE CASE OF EDUCATIONAL SOCIAL PRACTICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BUENOS AIRES

María Catalina Nosiglia

University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

### Abstract

University extension constitutes one of the fundamental functions served by Latin American universities. Its origin may be traced back to the events which took place at the 1918 Córdoba University Reform and, since then, such function has pursued various aims and has been performed—through different policies—at these universities, which have made its meaning more complex and have broadened its scope.

In this article, there is an analysis of one of the recently developed policies on university extension at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA): Educational Social Practices (ESPs). These practices constitute service-learning efforts, since they are formative paths which allow for the integration of curricular content with society's needs and demands. In this way, ESPs studies constitute a valuable contribution to the reflection on good practices related to the institutionalization and importance attached to university extension at universities.

### Introduction

The main objective of this article is to describe and analyze one of the recently developed policies on university extension at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA): those known as Educational Social Practices (ESPs). This article is divided into four sections. The first section briefly discusses the concept and history of university extension in Latin America. The second section analyzes the main landmarks of university extension at the UBA. In the third section, experiences related to ESPs are presented. Finally, the last section concludes with some reflections aimed to continue strengthening university extension policies.

### University Extension as a Fundamental Role of Latin American Universities

University extension has ample scope and various contents which mutated over the 20th century. Carlos Tunnermann traces the origin of such role back to the events which

took place in the 1918 Córdoba University Reform. At that moment, the newborn student movement questioned the disassociation between university actions and the demands and needs of society as a whole. However, this author points out that—in its inception—university extension was conceived as an effort to transmit university culture to society; thus assuming a welfare and paternalistic character (Tunnermann, 2017).

Pablo Buchbinder explains that the organization of student congresses in different cities of Argentina—and in other Latin American countries—triggered the reform program at a regional level and, this way, the importance of the social role of universities begins to become recognized (Buchbinder, 2012). An inescapable landmark which may well explain such growth was the creation of the International Federation of Students in 1921. Reformist students promoted, as a new university model, the inclusion of the social role of universities

*The legacy of the 1918 University Reform was university management democratization, less restricted access to university for the middle class, academic content updating, and the reshaping of a university with strong social commitment.*

and of university extension at all public universities. The legacy of the 1918 University Reform was university management democratization, less restricted access to university for the middle class, academic content updating, and the reshaping of a university with strong social commitment.

María Morales and Carolina Riaga, however, state that the first expansionary wave of university extension in the region had relatively limited scope. These authors explain that, in general, such extension policies neither had clear objectives nor were part of a well-developed program; in fact, they were dissociated from the other two academic roles: teaching and research. In addition, they stemmed from a concept of extension marked by the notion of cultural diffusion (Morales y Riaga, 2011).

This first vision underwent profound changes throughout the 20th century. For instance, it is important to highlight the organization of the 2nd Latin American Conference on Extension and Cultural Diffusion, held in Mexico in 1972, in which it was argued that there was a need for universities to contribute to the strengthening of regional cultures through a dialogic process between universities and society (Hernández, 1972). Another landmark was the 1st Regional Conference on Higher Education, which was held in La Habana in 1996. On that occasion, it was reasserted that university extension is one of the fundamental roles of universities (IESALC-UNESCO, 1996).

University extension is linked to citizenship formation, which involves projecting universities outside their walls—as explained by Victoria Kandel—in the sense of consolidating the status of students, professionals, scientists and faculty as citizens. According to Kandel, this idea captures the interpretation made by the reform movement in Córdoba (Kandel, 2016).

From a conceptual viewpoint, Gonzalo Serna explains that four models of university extension have been developed in Latin America. Although each model originated in different historic periods, they are all implemented nowadays. These four models are the following:

1. *The Altruist Model:* This model originated in the first decades of the 20th century. It conceives of university extension as a group of altruistic actions performed by universities to help marginalized populations. From this perspective, health brigades and legal consultancy services were launched, among other initiatives.
2. *The Information-Spreading Model:* This model places emphasis on spreading the knowledge acquired and the technical advances made at the heart of universities to society as a whole.
3. *The Awareness-Raising Model:* This model was inspired by Paulo Freire's approach. Actions within this model are aimed at creating, together with society, a space for performing a critical and transformative analysis of social reality.
4. *The Business Model:* This model received a great boost as from the 1980s. It is based on the postulate that universities must focus on satisfying the needs of companies and the productive sector. In this model it was possible to obtain economic benefits through the rendering of services, such as consultancy services and other efforts, and through the offer of postgraduate courses or continuing education programs (Serna, 2017).

The above four models are still being used in Latin American universities at present and they give rise to debates related to the roles of institutions and the detriment of the mercantilist trend which is part of the business model. However, Daniel Mato considers that, regardless of the extension model used most in each university, teaching and research usually come before extension programs. This author explains that this is seen, for example, when it comes to faculty recruitment processes, since experience related to participation in extension programs receives lower relative weighting (Mato, 2015).

In addition, Julieta Gomez and Mariano Negro, who carried out a study on the recommendations from the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (CONEAU, for its acronym in Spanish) within the framework of institutional evaluation pro-

cesses at Argentine public and private universities, noticed that the commission tended to observe, in most cases, that there was limited integration between extension policies and teaching and research actions (Gomez y Negro, 2016).

*Through this brief historic account, it is possible to understand the changes undergone by the concept of university extension and its scope in the region, as well as the problems—still faced—related to the lower level of institutionalization of extension programs in comparison with that of teaching and research. In this regard, recent initiatives within the framework of what is known as “service-learning efforts” constitute an interesting strategy to strengthen university extension.*

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Puig and Palos (2006) define these experiences as educational proposals which combine learning processes and community service in a single well-integrated project, in which participants learn and, at the same time, work to satisfy the real needs of their communities.

In addition, Monike Gezuraga states that service-learning programs are neither university volunteer programs nor isolated solidarity practices, but programs which require synergy-based coordination of educational and social efforts (Gezuraga, 2017).

In other words, María Nieves Tapia underlines that service-learning is a solidarity practice in which students participate and which is aimed at fulfilling the real needs of a community. This presupposes institutional planning integrating solidarity practice with the university curriculum (Tapia, 2006).

Indeed, the distinctive feature of service-learning within educational solidarity projects is its integration with curricular content, whose impact is on both teaching and society. After the discussion of these conceptual issues, in the next section there follows a brief



description of the main milestones related to university extension policies at the UBA, and then attention is directed to ESPs-related experiences.

## Main University Extension Programs at the UBA

The UBA was the second university created in the present Argentine territory in 1821 and it was nationalized in 1881. It is a public and fee-free university, and its mission is to contribute to culture development through humanist studies, scientific and technological research, and artistic creation, mainly focused on Argentina's problems.

*In 2019, 319 000 high school and undergraduate students and 21 000 postgraduate students were reported to be studying at this university. In addition, the number of faculty members rose to 22 800 and there were 13 600 non-faculty members*

It stands out for being a macro-university, due to its considerable dimension. It comprises thirteen colleges, which offer more than a hundred undergraduate courses and five hundred postgraduate courses. It also has six pre-university high schools,

six university hospitals and more than sixty research institutes. In 2019, 319 000 high school and undergraduate students and 21 000 postgraduate students were reported to be studying at this university. In addition, the number of faculty members rose to 22 800 and there were 13 600 non-faculty members, according to the statistical yearbook published by the Secretary's Office for University Policies.

The university's long history of social commitment dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, due to the fact that it incorporated early on a social role. Since then, the university's missions have been teaching, research and university extension. The current

*The current charter of the UBA includes a chapter on the social role of the university (Ch. III), and in section 69 of this chapter it is expressly stated that "there is a strong sense of solidarity in the relationship between the university and the society in which it is immersed.*

charter of the UBA includes a chapter on the social role of the university (Ch. III), and in section 69 of this chapter it is expressly stated that "there is a strong sense of solidarity in the relationship between the university and the society in which it is immersed." It is also highlighted that the uni-

versity is a tool for social improvement and it is at the service of the nation and of humanity's ideals. This social role was first incorporated into the UBA's charter approved as a result of the University Reform of 1918.

With a view to attaching more importance to extension policies and to their implementation, the UBA considered the creation of specialized implementation units. The first precedent was the creation of a Department of University Extension (DUE), which depended on the President's Office by virtue of Resolution No. 73/56 signed by the UBA's administrator president. This creation reflects the extension model of the reform university of the 1950s and 1960s. In this regard, Silvia Brusilovsky explains that said policy showed an attempt to integrate extension with teaching and research through an interdisciplinary effort made by various chairs and students, which focused on the problems faced with by the working classes (Brusilovsky, 2000). This author also mentions, as an outstanding policy, the creation of the Comprehensive Center of the Maciel Island, which focused for ten years on solving schooling problems among teenagers and adults and, simultaneously, training efforts related to work and health were carried out.

On the return of democracy, such policies had a fresh start. In 1984, more importance was given to the implementation of such role through the creation of the Secretary's Office for University Extension and Student Welfare, which depended on the President's Office. This unit's role is to assist the president with all tasks contributing to the interaction between university senates and other social sectors. Since then, each college has created its own implementation unit for the development of university extension. In the words of Martín Marcos—former Secretary of University Extension:

*Since university normalization, in 1994, a number of initiatives have been undertaken in various academic fields (...). Since the introduction of university extension, important outreach efforts have been made: culture production and diffusion, sports, work training, faculty refresher courses, social assistance, health prevention programs, institutional diffusion and a wide variety of extracurricular educational activities. (Marcos, 1993: 13-14)*

Another significant milestone in the history of the UBA was the approval of the Reform Program of the University of Buenos Aires by the Supreme Council in 1995. At that moment, some changes in various important functions were considered. As to university extension, the need for attaching more importance to this area and improving its integration with teaching and research was assessed. For the first time, the need to create a program for “community-based social service practices” was also raised and these practices were conceived as compulsory activities included in course curriculums. Although such initiative was not eventually implemented during the 1990s, it was picked up again in 2010 and it was assigned a new meaning through the creation of the Educational Social Practices.

A decade after the above-mentioned approval, in 2004, university extension gained new force through the creation of a subsidy program known as *UBANEX*. This policy involves granting economic subsidies to faculty chairs so that they can develop extension projects which must have students among their participants. Over five hundred projects with the aim of strengthening the relationship of the university with society as a whole have been financed since the program was launched.

Another effort, which constituted a landmark among university extension policies, was the development of the 2008 Comprehensive Community-Based Program for Vulnerable Neighborhoods. Through an interdisciplinary and intersectoral effort, the university implemented formal and non-formal initiatives and community-based health programs in various neighborhoods. It is important to point out that these efforts are designed within the framework of the Intercollege Commission, which depends on the Secretary's Office for University Extension and Student Welfare. This program was awarded the Mac Jannet first prize in 2011.

Finally, another important effort was the 2011 development of the Volunteer Program of the University of Buenos Aires. Its aim is to boost and consolidate solidarity initiatives within the university, which are conceived as an educational outreach tool. It is worth mentioning that this program involves organizing training courses for all regular students who wish to take part in volunteer initiatives. Since the program was launched, the university has financed various projects with different objectives, such as the promotion of health, literacy and a social economy, among others.

This is not an exhaustive list of the programs developed by the university, so it does not include scholarships or other welfare efforts aimed at the academic community as a whole. In the next section, our analysis will focus on a recent service-learning experience.

## **The Case of Educational Social Practices at the University of Buenos Aires**

The Educational social practices were introduced by the Supreme Council through Resolution (CS) 520/10, which approved the ESPs Program. These practices are pedagogical proposals which focus on both knowledge acquisition and the opportunity to benefit from social efforts while meeting curricular requirements and the needs of the community; that is the reason why they are learning and service initiatives.

*The Educational social practices were introduced by the Supreme Council through Resolution (CS) 520/10, which approved the ESPs Program. These practices are pedagogical proposals which focus on both knowledge acquisition and the opportunity to benefit from social efforts while meeting curricular requirements and the needs of the community; that is the reason why they are learning and service initiatives.*

ESPs comprise a formative path including three components:

- a.** A formative component, which involves skills development through teaching processes;
- b.** A social component, which is a practice developed in extra-curricular environments and aimed at the community; and
- c.** An intervention component, which involves the development of strategies to render services to the community in which the institution is immersed.

*These activities are part of the teaching and learning curriculum which promotes the integration of curricular content with the needs and demands of the community beyond university walls. They last approximately forty-two hours and are run by faculty teams.*

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In this respect, the incorporation of university extension activities into the course curriculum and their integration with teaching and research may create opportunities for maintaining meaningful learning and situated knowledge. Since these efforts allow for learning based on offering pragmatic solutions to real problems, they help foster the acquisition of knowledge, the development of skills and the adoption of the right attitudes by encouraging students to do research on and become involved in real situations in solidarity with their communities.

*The Extension Office is in charge of establishing connections with the community through the design of community-based projects within the framework of the UBANEX Program.*

Due to the fact that these initiatives involve both service and learning, there was a need for coordination between the Extension Office and the Academic Department to achieve their implementation.

The Extension Office is in charge of establishing connections with the community through the design of community-based projects within the framework of the UBANEX Program. Academic departments occupy an important role in assisting the various academic units with the incorporation of ESPs into their curriculums, faculty training and the assessment of proposals—in terms of their pertinence and quality—submitted for approval from the Supreme Council.

It is worth highlighting that these activities are thought of as compulsory projects which all undergraduate students must comply with during their formative path. In all cases, a faculty member is in charge of carrying out these projects and a team of assistant lecturers supervise students' activities.

In addition, each college of the university has flexibility in relation to the integration of these activities into its institutional and disciplinary traditions; consequently, it is possible for each college to approve its own specific rules concerning these efforts, and different ESPs may be adopted, as follows:

1. Course content acquired through fieldwork projects or similar activities, when its close connection to the adoption of social practices is clearly accounted for.
2. UBANEX extension projects.
3. Programs and activities developed by institutes or centers dependent on academic units and/or the President's Office.
4. Activities developed through agreements with public institutions and civil society organizations.
5. Proposals put forward by teams made up of actors belonging to chairs, departments and institutes.
6. Volunteer projects organized together with public agencies.

In order to appreciate the variety of experiences which are currently pursued at our university, the following table details the implementation of ESP in each college (See Table No. 1).

TABLE N°1 – IMPLEMENTATION OF ESPS IN COLLEGES (YEAR 2019)	
FORM OF INTEGRATION INTO ACADEMIC CURRICULUMS	ACADEMIC UNITS
As a subject in the academic curriculums UBANEX extension project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pharmacy and Biochemistry</li> <li>• Agronomy</li> <li>• Architecture, Design and Urban Studies</li> <li>• Economic Sciences</li> <li>• Social Sciences</li> <li>• Psychology</li> </ul>
Field projects or similar activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dentistry</li> <li>• Law</li> <li>• Social Sciences (new course curriculums)</li> <li>• Philosophy and Letters (new course curriculums)</li> </ul>
Proposals involving teams comprised of participants from more than one chair, departments and institutes (some of these projects are financed through the UBANEX Program).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exact and Natural Sciences</li> <li>• Veterinary Science</li> <li>• Engineering</li> <li>• Medicine</li> </ul>
Programs and activities developed by institutes or centers dependent on academic units.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philosophy and Letters (Center for Community-Based Innovation and Development (CIDAC, for its acronym in Spanish)</li> </ul>

Although Educational Social Practices were thought of as compulsory activities, in later rules issued by the Supreme Council it was decided that they would be temporarily optional in those academic units which were not ready for the implementation of these initiatives, due to their different experiences in connection with these efforts. With a view to overcoming this difficulty, the university launched training courses and reflection work-

*The university launched training courses and reflection workshops for all faculty members, which led to various extension experiences and projects and, eventually, the promotion of their institutionalization.*

shops for all faculty members, which led to various extension experiences and projects and, eventually, the promotion of their institutionalization. As a result, a geolocalized map and a digital repository of the various extension programs were designed.

In addition to the above-mentioned, in 2014 the Supreme Council signed an academic cooperation agreement with the UBA's Association of Faculty Members in order to work on joint efforts leading to the institutionalization of ESPs. One of the results of said agreement was the organization of a seminar-workshop coordinated by the Secretary's Office of Extension and Student Welfare of the UBA and the Association of Faculty Members of the UBA, which had the objective of assisting faculty members with the design and management of ESPs.

In this respect, it is worth highlighting that Kandel—as part of a research project—interviewed faculty members and students about the implementation of ESPs. This author explains that the interviewees considered ESPs appropriate initiatives to promote a closer relationship between the university and society. Students also tended to regard them as a way to give society as a whole—or share with it—the benefits of being able to access free university education (Kandel, 2016).

Finally, it is important to refer to the unexpected situation arising due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to deal with this healthcare emergency, the university's vast number of hospitals was placed at the disposal of national and provincial authorities, so that the population's healthcare coverage was extended and really significant clinical research was conducted. The UBA was also in charge of various university volunteer programs whose objective was the performance of essential tasks aimed at facing the healthcare emergency, such as the following: influenza vaccination campaigns for the population at risk; follow-up of patients who were home-isolated or had been discharged after suffering from COVID-19; dental treatment and prevention; free psychological therapy services; food services to vulnerable groups; among other efforts.

Resuming our analysis of ESPs, it is worth mentioning that during 2021 one-day faculty training courses were run in order to rethink such initiatives within the framework of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Specialists and faculty members participated in these courses, which were both in-person and online, and they reflected on the implemented initiatives.

## Final Reflections

At the beginning of this article, it was observed that university extension has ample scope and various contents which mutated over the 20th century. In our region, university extension was boosted by the 1918 Córdoba University Reform and, since then, various models and purposes have been adopted. It has also been pointed out that, despite the advances made, university extension is still second in importance after teaching and research at many universities.

With the aim of changing this situation, an important step was taken at the University of Buenos Aires in 2010 through the creation of the ESPs, which were designed to be compulsory for all undergraduate students in their formation paths. As explained, such practices have the distinctive features inherent in service-learning efforts, since they allow for the integration of curricular content with the needs and demands of the community beyond university walls.

*The case of the UBA constitutes a valuable contribution to the reflection on good practices related to university extension institutionalization and the importance attached to university extension policies.*

In this way, the case of the UBA constitutes a valuable contribution to the reflection on good practices related to university extension institutionalization and the importance attached to university extension policies. Looking

back at the first experiences in the 20th century, in which extension programs were not well designed and lacked clear objectives, it is clear that the current situation is different since university extension must be given, both formally and in practice, the same importance as teaching and research.

Finally, it is appropriate to conclude this article referring to the 3rd Regional Conference on Higher Education, which set out guidelines for Latin American universities. On that occasion, university extension was conceptualized as an inherent feature in our higher education systems:

*It is necessary to reaffirm the identity of universities in Latin America and the Caribbean, as opposed to the hegemonic standardized model of the elitist university. To achieve this goal, decisions and policies at Latin American public universities must include the notion of inseparability between teaching, research and extension as well as their identity and historic traditions in their missions and aims. This will enable universities to regain an important role in society in terms of their contribution to creative, productive and cultural development. (Final declaration at the 3rd Regional Conference on Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2018:50)*

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*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

***“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”***

*Pope Francis*

## **4** Institutionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education

This work aims to discover and highlight all the wealth within the perspectives of the different actors participating in the institutionalization processes of service-learning in Higher Education. Through the description of various global cases of service-learning institutionalization, the book presents reflections, actions and experiences that outline conceptual elements and key features, seeking to contribute to the great global debate on how and to which purpose processes allowing for the integration of service-learning into the identity and culture of Higher Education institutions are launched and developed.

We introduce this fourth volume of the Uniservitate collection with the firm intention of allowing readers to experience, through its pages, a journey across the different continents and cultures, exploring stories as diverse as the contexts and actors behind them, and to take on the challenges and dreams that we believe the book suggests, with a forward-looking approach, for those interested in a Higher Education that is more engaged with the world in which it unfolds its actions.

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