

2008 ATLA Award Remarks  
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***Introduction***

Many thanks for your kind comments Mr. Gates. There are two reasons to be proud and honored in receiving the 2008 ATLA Award. First, as typically the case with innovative ideas, at the start of this initiative there were just a few who believed that Vasconcelos would have a relevant social impact. This significant recognition represents a magnificent incentive for all those involved in the project, including the community members who benefit from it. Second, we are delighted to receive this important award from a Foundation that today is a global reference, and by that I mean a model to follow around the world. Led by positive thinkers, other philanthropic organizations should join efforts and create functional synergies under the conviction that the challenges of our planet can be faced through alliances and networking. It is a great distinction to be the recipient of an award that comes from a foundation which promotes access to learning as the primary means to alleviate poverty, increase self-esteem, and empower the small community.

I take this opportunity to thank Mr. Bill Gates Senior and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for the support they provide to projects that improve people's lives throughout the world. Its contribution for digitizing public libraries in Mexico has expanded free access to on-line educational, cultural, and information services. For example, in Veracruz, my home state, we are talking about computerizing and connecting more than 362 public libraries by next year. The 2008 ATLA Award will add strength to Vasconcelos. It will enable us to sustain and extend our mission of advancing educational equity in the most marginalized of our communities.

## ***Inspiration***

Let me tell you a little about our State of Veracruz and the rationale behind Vasconcelos Program. Straddling the gulf coast of Central Mexico, Veracruz is a long state that rises from sea level to steep mountains towards the west. Its rugged topography and highly dispersed rural population are the main factors of having many small villages of difficult access. Although there are about 20 medium-sized cities which account for two thirds of its population, the rest is dispersed in more than 20,000 rural locations with fewer than 500 inhabitants who lack the most basic services and facilities. Ten percent of the people living in these villages speak only an indigenous language. As well as remoteness and isolation, high rates of unemployment, poverty, adult illiteracy, and out-migration challenge these rural communities. The most recent census estimates that approximately more than 340,000 migrants from Veracruz now live in the United States. Due to the poor infrastructure in their home country, they have little opportunity for communication with their families for long periods of time.

In December of 2004, I was appointed Minister for Public Education in Veracruz by our incoming Governor Fidel Herrera Beltran. My first priority was to conceive and implement a comprehensive strategy to improve our educational services throughout the State, particularly in rural and indigenous regions. At that time, I had almost finished my second term as President of the University of Veracruz. There, I had developed projects related to two issues close to my heart: the intensive use of upgraded information and computer technologies (ICTs) and learning methodologies to enhance educational quality at the University, and the deployment of extension programs to promote self-sustained development in poor communities with the volunteered work of students.

The first project implied an aggressive investment program to build about 120,000 square feet of new library spaces, information facilities and fiber optics connectivity to promote high-quality face to face and distance learning in our regional campuses network, distributed throughout thirteen cities in the State. Our aim was,

among other things, to establish a virtual library system composed of 54 dispersed library facilities among the various campus, academic departments and research centers.

The second project was aimed to take advantage of youth idealism and interdisciplinary knowledge to establish year-round extension services brigades to encourage self-managed local action on issues related to health, productivity and community infrastructure in some of our most remote and poor villages. At that time, we learned about the complexities involved in community work and the constraints associated with expanded operations.

So, the first questions I faced as Minister of Education were: how to make the best use of our previous experience at the University and how to surmount, if possible, the magnitude of our challenge. We decided to follow a multi-modal approach by developing a new radio and television educational channel which optimizes our current public telecommunications network wide band (Educational Channel); setting up a new multi-institutional consortium for online learning which uses the virtual facilities that already exist in academic institutions, schools, community centers and public libraries (*Clavijero* Consortium) to operate all sorts of formal educational programs, included those related to teaching updating; creating regional centers for training teachers, where an essential purpose is to model the proper use of ICTs for enhancing learning (*Rébsamen* Centers); extending connectivity and computing facilities in rural schools; and by using mobile virtual classrooms and libraries to bring the essential benefits of modern day education to the most disadvantaged rural communities (Vasconcelos Program).

An essential inspiration for our mobile classrooms was the pioneer work of a previous Mexico's Minister of Education and liberal Philosopher, José Vasconcelos, who in the 1920's had the vision of expanding educational opportunities for all, even in remote and less privileged communities. His challenge was precise: how to carry on cultural missions and distribute reading materials in

small rural villages. Undaunted by large distances and poor infrastructure at the time, he formulated his own novel response – he used mules and donkeys to transport the missionaries and the precious books of learning to areas otherwise inaccessible.

Recalling his work, an idea began to take shape: Imagine traveling classrooms equipped with the latest technologies to support communications and information access, which have become the life blood of modern learning. Children, young people and adults of the most remote villages could, in a few steps, leave the world of the 19th century and be transported to the 21<sup>st</sup>, without having to leave their communities.

### ***Structure***

Thus, our Vasconcelos program was born, with the goal of bringing the latest technology with the most current educational programs to where it is most needed, our poorest, marginalized communities. Working towards this aim, our program was built on the technical and community resources available and on the services, expertise and experience already well developed at the University of Veracruz. We designed mobile, virtual classrooms by outfitting all-terrain vehicles to provide the most up-to-date educational opportunities to people in their own environment, just as Vasconcelos had done in the past.

Our initial efforts were modest, with just one pilot vehicle in 2005. By 2006 we had 4 vehicles. Today we have 24 and intend to increase our fleet to at least 30 buses. Initial funds came from my office budget and, then, from the State government, public enterprises and the private sector. We also scaled up our operations by using existing resources, such as those set up by the Federal Government under the e-Mexico program, which consisted of establishing community digital centers (CDCs), and the recently digitized public libraries with funds coming from the Gates Foundation Grant. Both programs offer free access to computers and internet services to the public throughout the country. Today, we are piloting two new

projects: One, is to get municipal governments to acquire their own vehicles, so that Vasconcelos can provide full time service to their respective districts; and, second, to optimize the use of media classrooms located in schools and educational institutions, so that they can expand learning opportunities to other members of their community, with the support of courses and staff from the multi-institutional consortium for on-line education (Consortio Clavijero) and from Vasconcelos.

Our experience has shown that equipment and connectivity is only part of the equation. We have found that community digital centers were under-utilized especially in remote rural areas. People in these communities were not familiar with the technology and use of computers; the software was not directly relevant; and the machines fell into disrepair. The Vasconcelos Program has addressed this problem by recognizing the importance of the human factor. That is why we are using trained personnel to conduct experiential learning practices as well as providing technological resources. Our model consists of sending a team into a village for an advanced visit to discuss the needs with public officials, community leaders, teachers and other concerned individuals. Thus, planning and design is done ahead of time and in consultation with the local community, so that materials and training can be tailored to their needs.

A week later the mobile classroom arrives, with a team well-trained and experienced in technology, learning issues and, above all, community work. They spend a 2-3 weeks period in the village, providing fun and relevant instruction to children, young adults, parents, rural workers, local producers, artisans and municipal employees -with a special focus on teachers and public school students, who constitute about one third of the state's population. Weeks later, these team members return for a technological check and, after they leave, they continue to provide on-line backup support to the technical personnel and facilitators operating the digital centers.

Our team members are drawn from graduate students from a variety of disciplines who have shown motivation and interest in community outreach. The ethos of community service, solidarity and teamwork accomplished during their training is outstanding. The program success relies largely on the enthusiasm of our young staff, which is certain that social change and progress is possible, and who are highly motivated because they see themselves as missionaries who bring to people self-esteem based on meaningful and helpful learning that increases their quality of life.

### ***Impact***

The impact is evident in many aspects of local life, including the larger communities. There are many examples of the internet becoming a tool for communication with family members in other places. Students in rural areas further their instruction through high quality software and online education. Teachers improve their ICTs skills applied to experiential and collaborative learning. Farmers increase their agricultural productivity. Small businesses are experimenting higher levels of consolidation through better marketing mechanisms for their local products, arts and crafts; and female leadership is increasing in all sorts of self-sustained initiatives.

Vasconcelos has to date reached over 120,000 people throughout the state of Veracruz, successfully promoting the use of ICTs. Communities and individuals are encouraged to use technology to develop empowerment and ownership of the knowledge acquired. Our vision for the future is to reach an even greater number of communities to foster learning environments that develop skills, that increase productivity and economic development, that lead to a greater sense of identity, and that help reduce inequality in educational and life outcomes.

As in much of Latin America, in Mexico large numbers of people have few resources. The redistribution of opportunities to quality education is vital to

overcome that sad scenario. We see it as the only way forward. Access to relevant knowledge provides the best vehicle for local empowerment and progress. *Education equalizes unequal opportunities.* It thus paves a path for a world where massive migration, family disintegration, poverty, ignorance, delinquency, and environmental disaster become a past chapter of human history. Confident thinkers need to converge to make this dream come true. Let us celebrate this occasion because we recognize that proper steps are heading in the right direction.

Thank you.