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**International Institutional Efforts for the Formation  
of Competent Professors in Teaching and Research**

**By:**

**Juana Edith Cruz-Quevedo DSN**

**Raquel Alicia Benavides-Torres PhD**

**Esther C. Gallegos-Cabriaes PhD**

**School of Nursing**

**Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León**



### *Background*

Progress in Mexican education has been significant in recent decades. Illiteracy has decreased and the national average of years of formal education has increased, although there are significant differences between states. This progress is evident in the increasing number of students who finish Junior High and College (Presidencia de la Republica, 2007). However, even though access to college education has increased, the rate of graduation is lower than that for elementary education and even lower for graduate studies (Master's or Doctoral degrees) (Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior [ANUIES], 2005).

Some officials from the Ministry of Education in Mexico have expressed concern that the national educational system focuses on information, rather than on formation. It is said that the system is based more on rote-learning than on the development of cognitive and critical thinking skills that will enable students and graduates to be self-learners and promoters of their own progress throughout their lives. The focus on information is also noted in both elementary and higher education (Escoffie, 2004).

Nursing education in Mexico clearly reflects educational trends throughout the country. Most nurses are trained through three-year programs which require only nine years of basic education as a prerequisite. At present, there are approximately 30 university nursing programs offering a bachelor's degree, no more than 10 offering a Master's Degree, two or three



offering advanced programs for specialists, and only one doctoral program (Sánchez-Gándara, 2004). While there are relatively few higher education nursing programs, the increase in university programs is a reflection of the current effort to transform the training and practice of nursing from basic preparation to a practice with greater educational and research support.

Clearly, the percentage of nurses with higher academic degrees is increasing and the need for more preparation at the doctoral level is recognized within Mexico. However, the development of professional nursing is slow when compared with other countries that are characterized by a solid preparation in the areas of teaching and research. In regards to nursing education in Mexico, the efforts to regulate the profession by requiring a bachelor's degree as the minimum acceptable level of education has been limited by the wide demand for nurses in the workforce. Consequently, many institutions are still preparing technical and assistant nurses (Llarena-Thierry, 2004).

On the other hand, graduate programs exist in state universities that traditionally do not have intensive research programs. Most of the research being conducted in Mexico is tied to educational requirements for a Master's Degree. Research is limited to descriptive and correlational studies (Benavides, 2002). In terms of publications and funding for research, resources and opportunities are also limited. Further, faculty thesis directors or advisers do not often conduct research. Mentoring of students in research is limited and divorced from an on-going program of research. This system makes it difficult to sustain research programs and also to provide optimal research learning experiences for students. Therefore, the preparation of



teachers, specialists, and doctors that could improve nursing research is an urgent issue that need to be addressed. Fortunately, the situation is beginning to change and professors are now participating in research. Even though these research activities are still at a modest level, they are sufficient to support Master's Degree and Doctoral programs in Nursing Science (Mateos-García, Fernández-Sarmiento, Valderrama-Franco, Vázquez-Santiago & González-Serna, 2007).

This brief overview of nursing education in Mexico explains why it is critical for graduate programs (and some undergraduate programs) to seek alternative educational experiences that complement the development of nurses at the Master's Degree level, and especially at Doctoral level. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to share the experiences and the efforts of an institution that is interested in the ongoing development of competent professors in their teaching and research roles.

The School of Nursing of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL), with 25 years of experience in granting Nursing Master's Degree programs, has carried out numerous strategic efforts to strengthen teaching and research areas. It is believed these efforts would facilitate the advance of nursing practice and research. Major efforts were centered on the development of collaborative networks. For example, one of the goals we set and achieved was becoming a chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing. We did this with the clear objective of establishing collaboration to contribute to and improve the preparation of nurses at UANL. This Chapter was the first and currently is the only one in Mexico.



Additionally, research programs are beginning to be developed in collaboration with well-known, prestigious institutions. In one example, our collaboration with the University of Michigan's School of Nursing at Ann Arbor resulted in a research study funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research (Villarruel, 1999). This study provided numerous opportunities for faculty, students, and other health professionals to be exposed to and involved in a major randomized controlled trial designed to reduce sexual risk behaviors among adolescents.

Another effort being carried out is aimed at strengthening the faculty by supporting professors to engage in doctoral programs internationally, in countries like the United States, Brazil, and Spain. This effort is expected to produce professors with different educational perspectives and experiences. Through this initiative, faculty at UANL received the necessary support to increase the likelihood of success in their respective doctoral programs. The support included language preparation (English or Portuguese), statistical introductory courses, assistance with scholarship applications, preparation for the admission exams, and collaborative agreements with the host universities.

In addition, the UANL School of Nursing enrolled the first group of graduate students in the Doctor in Nursing Science Degree Program in August 2003. This is the first nursing doctoral program in Mexico. We quickly concluded that there were not enough professors conducting formal research to support the program. Further, faculty who were involved in research had been doing so for a short time and did not have well-established programs of research. Consequently, the academic environment lacked opportunities that



would model the independent and multidisciplinary research needed by doctoral students.

With the goal of providing opportunities for the students to experience the intensive work of nursing research, a critical strategy was devised: Doctoral students would study one semester in a US university directed by research mentors who were conducting research in areas related to students' area of interest. We purposefully selected universities that had a strong research program to guarantee a fruitful experience in those settings.

*Institutional Significance of the Formation of Professors and Students' Stays in a Foreign Country*

As a higher education institution, the UANL, and in particular the Nursing School, supported the exchange of professors and students with other universities, particularly with those that offer the best opportunities in critical areas such as research. The development of professors abroad enriches the diversity of visions and perspectives that are promoted within the university. These efforts contribute to the UANL vision of being the most prestigious public university, both nationally and internationally through five strategic areas: improvement of competitiveness and academic innovation; research and the spread of knowledge; social links; extension and management.

Similarly, we believed incorporating one semester away from the university as part of the Doctor of Science Nursing Program would improve our status and reputation both inside and outside of the UANL. This aspect of the program was one of the factors the National Council of Science and



Technology (CONACYT) took into account, in 2007, in recognizing our DSN program as a program of excellence.

A significant effort was required on the part of the institution and the students to negotiate an agreement with the host institutions. The first step was to find faculty who would accept the “extra load” of a visiting foreign student with language limitations. This would be an important consideration since visiting students would not be seeking a degree in the host university, and in addition their performance could be lower than what would be expected from a students enrolled in the program. Faculty who were in key leadership positions within the host institutions were instrumental in identifying and supporting nurse researchers to accept this additional responsibility. Thus in the initial year UANL students and faculty were supported in these research experiences at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, the University of Indiana School of Nursing, Lehman College, the University of Arizona School of Nursing, and the University of Texas Health Sciences Center at San Antonio. Although we had institutional agreements with each university, the experiences were made possible through the time and effort of individual faculty at the host universities. Their efforts resulted in excellent professional learning opportunities for UANL students and faculty.

Up until now, the evaluation of efforts and strategies to provide additional research experiences in foreign universities indicates positive results. Currently, three professors who received their doctoral training in the U.S. and Brazil and one graduate our own program are being evaluated to become part of the National System of Researchers. There is no doubt that



the diversity of educational development and experiences will be result in a better performance in their roles in the areas of teaching and the research of nursing in Mexico. The following is the account given by two faculty who were experienced different learning strategies: one obtained a doctoral degree in a U.S. university; the other one studied for a doctoral degree in Mexico and spent one term in the U.S.. They express how their experiences as students contributed to their current roles in teaching and research.

*Experience as a Doctoral Student in the US*

In this section I share the experiences I had while studying in the United States for the purpose of developing a different perspective about nursing. Facing a different culture and sharing experiences with classmates and professors from various parts of the world contributed to my development in nursing research and teaching, and enriched my current role as a professor. These experiences took place at the University of Texas at Austin, School of Nursing, and were developed in various settings: Academic Environment, Student Environment, being part of a Minority Community, and Participating in Research.

*Academic Environment*

Creating an academic environment that promotes comprehensive learning is a challenge that every educational institution faces. This is even more so for an institution that receives doctoral students from different parts of the world. Initially, most doctoral students face an adaptation process which presents coping challenges. This is why it was particularly important for me to have professors and an academic staff who created a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere for my development as a student.



The interactions with professors were enriching. Collaboration between student and professors reflect a collegial relationship. The dynamics of seminar classes facilitated and promoted student participation, which was as valuable as the professor's participation. Likewise, the effort made by faculty to provide adequate leadership and direction was reflected in the feedback and constructive criticism I received regarding my work, presentations in class, publications, and presentations at conferences. Positive, helpful, and open communication in each one of the courses created collegial relationships by establishing and throughout my studies.

Another favorable aspect of my academic experience was the climate of respect for the student's activities and time. For example, whenever additional time was necessary for consultation or advice, the professors were always available either in their office hours or by appointment. A central player in my preparation and academic environment was my adviser, Dr. Lynn Rew. She was an excellent mentor, providing me with the necessary tools for my development and challenging me to increase my level of critical reasoning. This was useful, in the process of acquiring knowledge about my area of interest.

In addition to the faculty, the highly qualified administrative personnel were available to take care of academic needs (availability of classes) and personal needs (family or health problems) that could interfere with the completion of the doctoral program. In summary, I experienced a strong academic environment with a welcoming atmosphere in terms of presence, problem-solving, and a strong student-service orientation. ,



*Student Environment*

Even though most doctoral students had some characteristics in common, the majority of us came from different countries and had different customs and multiple interests. In spite of the differences, there was always an atmosphere of support and collegiality among classmates. Resident students recognized the attributes of those of us who were foreign students and we, in turn, relied on them when we did not understand an instruction or a task. Positive feedback in and out of the classroom was a common practice that favored supportive interpersonal relations within the group. I believe this environment was created by a favorable and purposeful infrastructure designed to promote such an atmosphere.

The infrastructure supported the creation of this positive atmosphere among students. For example, we had work areas, offices for thesis writing, and a Graduate Lounge, which facilitated the collegiality during break and lunch hours. This infrastructure fostered fellowship with other professors and students and enriched relationships. One logistical aspect that undoubtedly supported a favorable academic environment was the recognition of the students' efforts or achievements. Throughout the doctoral program a bulletin board was used to post notices of awards and accomplishments such as publications, and accepted projects. This strategy helped me to recognize other students' efforts and encouraged me to continue improving myself.



*A Minority Community*

The percentage of Hispanics enrolled in the graduate program at UT Austin is 12.4%, making it the third minority. In my class at the school of nursing the number of foreign students was proportional to the number of US students, however, we were only two Hispanic students. Therefore, it is important to describe the experience within a minority community, in my case, the Hispanic community. This diversity created the perception of a culturally appropriate environment. I assumed that professors, academic staff and other students were aware the difficulties in adapting to the environment in one form or another because they always tried to create a welcoming atmosphere. In spite of their efforts, there were times when I felt a sense of isolation and of not being part of the group.

One of the difficulties I faced as a foreign student was that I had two limitations: 1) proficiency in English and 2) limited research knowledge. I was evaluated at the beginning of the program and the conclusion was that I needed to take more ESL classes and a research course at a Master's Degree level. This initially made the academic load even heavier.

However, faculty expressed empathy and encouraged greater participation by showing interest, for instance, in knowing about health systems and problems that exist in our countries. Their efforts helped us to feel part of the larger student group. Similarly, I received support at the student center for the preparation of my projects, proposals, and publications. This was a great help to me in overcoming the language limitations, particularly at the beginning of my studies. Generally speaking, as I reflect



on this experience, I believe that being part of a minority community was an enriching experience. While I faced greater challenges during my stay, this experience enabled me to be more sensitive towards others and develop a broader perspective as a professor. This experience will enable me to be more aware of the individuality of students I encounter in my faculty role.

#### *Participation in Research*

It is well known that a doctoral program with ample availability of research experiences, and integration into faculty research, is essential for the students' development as a researcher. This was particularly true in my case. Through classes like Independent Study or Research Practicum, I had the opportunity to participate in three different research projects. The first one was "LONGHERBY", a longitudinal study aimed at knowing the health risks of adolescents (Rew, 2002). My participation included activities like recruitment of participants, data collection, and modification of the consent forms for the IRB, drafting manuscripts for publication and presentations at conferences.

Additionally as part of the Research Practicum Project, I joined the Writing Intervention work team. During this experience I learned about tools for the analysis of qualitative data and the use of different analytical software packages. Lastly, I participated in a study about Hispanic women with cancer led by Dr. Im Eun-Ok, who was an extraordinary organized and task-oriented researcher. This experience helped me to learn a more standardized method of working which allowed me to reflect on the effort I needed to put to achieve my research objectives. Working in these different projects provided me with the opportunity to work within a scientific context.



It also provided me with different skills that facilitated my development as a researcher.

In conclusion, my experiences as I interacted in the academic environment, the student environment, being part of a minority group, and participation in others research motivated me to reflect on my present role as researcher and professor. Now I am able to recognize the importance of: a) intensive participation in ongoing preparation in order to improve research and education; b) carrying out research specific to my area of interest and; c) seeking opportunities and support to provide similar opportunities for UANL students currently in the PHD program. I am also sensitive to the individuality of each student, especially those who, in addition to facing the experience of being enrolled in a graduate program, are foreigners and face a different social and cultural setting. Finally I believe in the development of personal and professional relationships which will facilitate the academic and research development of UANL faculty and students.

*Experience as a Doctoral Student in Mexico Spending One Term in a Foreign University*

As a student, one has the opportunity to interact with faculty who have different perspectives about nursing, leadership, and the roles of nursing. This diversity facilitates the development of skills essential for teaching and research, which are key components of faculty roles. These skills include role modeling, the ability to carry out independent research, professional socialization, and the ability to clarify an individual's contribution to the discipline. This section presents the account of three of these experiences: a)



a research stay in a foreign university; b) developing skills in English as a second language; and c) the mentoring experience.

*Research Stay in a Foreign University*

As a doctoral student whose major focus is research, it was necessary to establish contact with leading nurse researchers and to develop mentoring experiences that would allow students to 'live' the life of research. In the light of this need, UANL, through agreements signed with foreign universities, and planned research stays with experienced researchers who had similar research foci to students.

In particular, I had the opportunity to work for four months with Dr. Carolyn Murdaugh at the University of Arizona School of Nursing. This was one of the most significant experiences of the doctoral program. This experience allowed me to face personal and professional challenges that contributed to my growth. Role modeling is one of the best strategies used in the teaching-learning process, but, at the same time, it is one of the most complex to master. Planning it is not enough. There must be a true role model from whom to learn, and the conditions of the person seeking to learn must be optimal in order to make good use of the resource.

During my stay, the main objective of the proposed work plan was to further develop the research proposal developed during my coursework in Mexico. In addition, I participated in each of the activities that Dr. Murdaugh carried out as a researcher and as Associate Dean. This allowed me to be exposed to important researcher roles, such as peer critiques and group leadership,



During my stay I also participated in discussion groups, including the ethics group, the writers group, and the main researchers group. These groups met once a month to discuss the work of one of its members for the purpose of strengthening ethical aspects of research studies, refining publications, proposals, and research ideas. Without a doubt, the quality of the discussions about the research was one of the best experiences for learning research methodology. Discussions about participant selection, recruitment, and retention of in a research project allowed me to have a much clearer idea of what I would face in my own project. These experiences went beyond what I read in textbooks. An effective way to learn how to recognize possible threats to the reliability and validity of the research in order to take them into account is by recognizing those threats through the work of others and applying them to your own work.

Additionally, in those groups I had the opportunity to experience constructive criticism and peer critique. It is very important for a learner to recognize that in a group, each contribution is valuable and respected. The group interacted in an environment of mutual help and support, with the common goal of the development of science to advance the discipline.

Group leadership, an essential factor for the success of any project, can not be learned in any other way, except through role models. Even though leadership skills are developed throughout our personal and professional lives, and enriched with our own experiences, observing and following a good role model completes the process. My vision of group leadership, which began to be developed with professors and colleagues in Mexico, became



more complete by working and observing the negotiation of tasks and roles that Dr. Murdaugh and her team demonstrated.

In addition, my stay in a foreign country enabled me to present my previous research experiences with the “Cuídate” research project (Villarruel, 1999). This was an excellent experience that facilitated the sharing of knowledge, professional socialization, and collaborative work.

Thus, through this international experience, all learning objectives were achieved. The learning experience went beyond the academic goals. I strongly believe that it is through role modeling that the essence of “being” a researcher is cultivated.

*The experience of developing skills for English as a second language and use them as basic tools.*

An equally significant experience was learning English, a basic tool for research. Most of the avant-garde knowledge in science, particularly in the nursing discipline, is published in English. Based on this fact, the doctoral program at UANL is proposing to require a minimum of 550 points on the TOEFL for admission to the doctoral program. In order for students to obtain this grade, it was suggested that they should take two intensive summer courses of English in U.S. institutions with established programs in teaching English as a second language. This would supplement individual student learning strategies. On the one hand, my progress in mastering English enabled me to understand the existing literature, contextualize the study phenomenon, and establish limits to the research problem. On the other hand, being comfortable with English was a vital tool for the development of



communication skills and socializing with professors and colleagues from other parts of the world.

The academic program at UANL included foreign professors who taught their classes in English. Discussion of topics, debate of ideas, and exchange of knowledge would not have been possible without having a minimum level of English communication skills. This was one of the greatest challenges to overcome as an individual, but becoming proficient in English is also a great satisfaction resulting from participation in this program.

Learning English was a necessary prerequisite of the doctoral program at UANL. In addition, it enables the student to interact with researchers around the world, share research findings in international forums, and become part of the circle of knowledge development. During my stay at the University of Arizona, I had the opportunity to work with a well-known researcher, learn about her culture, and exchange ideas and experiences. Furthermore, I had my first experience presenting a scientific product in an international forum in English. As a novice in the world of research, and thanks to my increased English proficiency, I can now keep in touch with foreign researchers who critique my work and give me feedback. I expect to be in a position in the near future to carry out collaborative work through these networks.

### *The Mentoring Experience*

There is no doubt that working hand-in-hand with a senior researcher was a vital experience for me as a student. In addition to providing me with methodological support, she continued to be a mentor in the process of becoming a nurse researcher. Besides covering the aspects of role modeling



mentioned above, my mentor helped me to develop another integrative skills. Through this personalized guidance, I gradually discovered my true professional being. Through refining my research focus I brought together my personal and professional interests and I became a different person. I cannot point to the precise activities that I jointly carried out with my mentor, but I know that when I think back on my stay in the program, I can say with certainty that she was always there to support me in the academic environment and promote my professional development.

There are two characteristics of my mentor that I consider essential for my development. One was her challenging and questioning nature, which continuously forced me to apply critical thinking to any and all topics. This helped me to expand my perspective and develop new questions to which I would seek answers. The second characteristic was her unique ability to intellectually adapt her own thinking to that of the receiver, and from there guide him/her to higher levels of thought and discussion. I think that without these characteristics the development of independent study skills, autonomy, and the capacity to critique (all essential for the teaching and research roles in nursing) would not have been possible.

Even though these experiences were only a part of the doctoral program, I do consider them the most important ones in this stage of my life. I am certain that they made a significant contribution to the new roles in teaching and research that I now carry out.

### *Lessons Learned*



Our goal at the UANL School of Nursing is to have faculty with the best qualifications in order to achieve the necessary standards of quality in the development of new nursing professionals. Recognizing the lessons learned during the implementation of the strategies for the development of the faculty, enables us to rethink successful actions and redirect those that have not been as successful. In addition, it clarifies new challenges and opportunities to develop strategies to overcome them. This is the reason for mentioning some of the lessons learned as we sought to improve the teaching and research abilities of our professors.

One of the most significant lessons has to do with the wealth found in diversity. The set of experiences we had as we faced new scientific and cultural settings expanded the visions and perspectives we had about nursing. They were also a source of new ideas about the practice of teaching and research for the young professors who have had the opportunity to interact in these settings. The challenge now is to continue promoting diversity, to value its significance, and to support innovative ideas of development that may be translated into a transforming practice for teaching and research in nursing.

It is clear that one of the strengths of our programs, especially the doctoral program, is the promotion of international experience for our students. The exposure to new challenges, and to opportunities to work and collaborate with professionals in nursing and related disciplines, stimulates the students' professional growth. This collaboration enables students to gain experience in research, be exposed to the best role models, develop socialization skills, expand professional networks, gain new knowledge, and



learn to give and receive constructive criticism. The challenge now is to expand this strength to basic nursing and Master's Degree programs. One strategy could be the integration of undergraduate, Master and Doctoral students into existing programs of research of our faculty. This would potentially benefit a larger number of students by creating learning networks and opportunities facilitated by close mentoring and professional role-modeling.

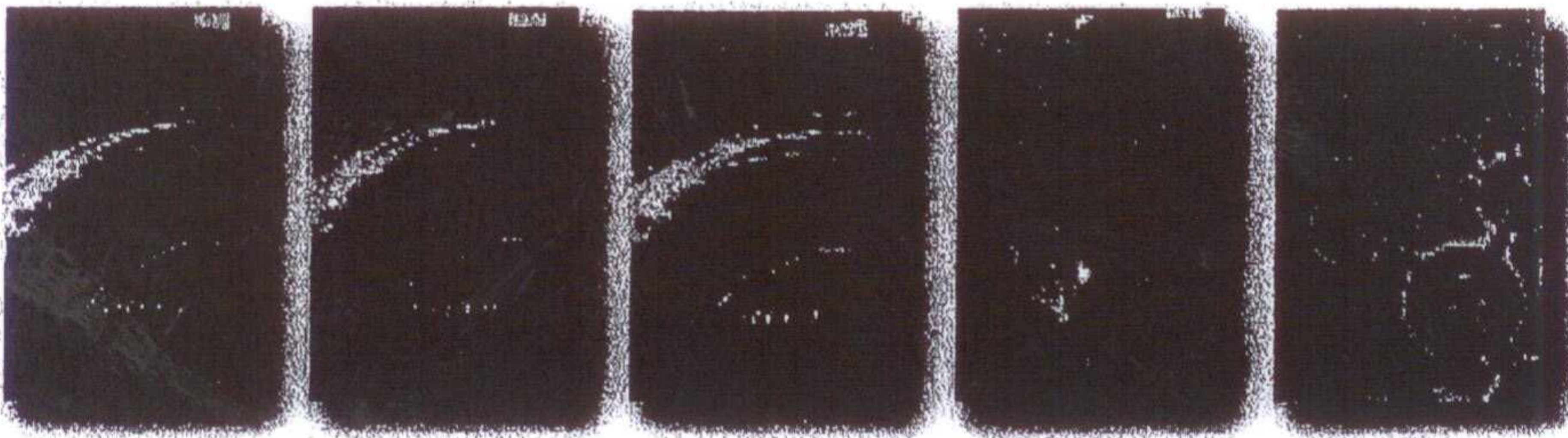
The integration of research in all the educational levels of our school may strengthen scientific production in terms of dissemination and funding of research. These two issues present major challenges in our setting in Mexico and at UANL. Additionally, the integration of research educational levels will facilitate the collaboration and cooperation qualities in projects related to the generation and application of knowledge. By doing this the benefits that come from networks can be extended to colleagues from other countries.

One last lesson has to do with individual differences among students. It is important to recognize that during this academic transition individuals will adapt to the program and to the social and academic context in different ways, based on their own frames of reference and experiences. The fact that our professors went through these experiences makes us more sensitive to

this situation.



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