



Summer seminar students, 2019.

Alberto Díaz Cayeros\*

## Young Mexican Indigenous University Students at Stanford

Several students with different profiles and experiences spent three weeks together in total immersion, analyzing urgent problems in the social sciences. Given the prevailing uncertainty and pessimism among some of us due to insecurity, a dearth of opportunities, and political confusion in Mexico, we concluded that a community response was required based on the experiences of the first peoples.

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\* Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Stanford University; [albertod@stanford.edu](mailto:albertod@stanford.edu)  
Photo, courtesy of the author.

The summer seminar “Global Risks, Security, Crime, and Governance,” held in Stanford, California, from July 15 to August 3, 2019, brought together university students from first peoples all over Mexico and others from the Autonomous Institute of Mexico (ITAM). The ITAM’s Vidal Romero and Stanford University’s Alberto Díaz Cayeros coordinate the program that originated the seminar, under the auspices of the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Learning (ANUIES) and the U.S. Embassy in Mexico.

We went to the world center of technological innovation and social change, a unique venue and the product

of three revolutions: the environmentalist, women's, and computer science revolutions, which have radically changed the way we live. Here, our university students share their experiences in their own voices.

**Mitzy Violeta Guzmán**  
**Mixtec from San Sebastián Tecomaxtlahuaca,**  
**Oaxaca**

I'm Violeta. I'm Mixtec and I study at the School of Political and Social Sciences at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. I say that with pride, recognizing the privilege it implies. When I went to get my number for the admission exam, only my mother and my sister thought that I would really be admitted to the country's best university. Before that, I had studied at an Agricultural High School Center, which I was able to get into on the first try. Finally, I was admitted to the UNAM when I was 17, so I came to live in Mexico City. Until that moment, I hadn't thought about what that implied, since the important thing was the university and having the chance to study for a degree. With time, you learn that many young people only need that: a chance.

After three years at the UNAM, I applied for a seminar organized by Stanford University and the ITAM. There, I met important academics, both men and women, from that university and was able to talk about issues like machine learning in the social sciences, community police in Brazil, and gangs in El Salvador. I did all that side-by-side with other young indigenous people who became my family for those weeks.

Being able to meet such great people made me value my own roots and culture more, and let me know that you can create science from other viewpoints. It awakened my interest in research, and above all, made me understand that, no matter how impossible it might seem, there are people fighting for us to at least have the chance to dream.

**Víctor Guzmán Cruz**  
**Nahua from Ocotepec, Puebla**

My name is Víctor Guzmán Cruz; I'm a Nahua indigenous from the Northern Sierra of Puebla. I studied high school at a shelter founded by Professor Gabriel Salom Flores in

**"As a young indigenous woman, my ambition to study public administration and political science seemed absurd to my high school teachers, unattainable to my family, ridiculous to my friends."**

**RAQUEL JUÁREZ, Totonac**

San Andrés Tepexoxuca, in Ixtacamaxtlán, Puebla. The school is currently run by an NGO (<https://www.facebook.com/Tamachtiniac/>).

Going to high school was very significant for me, key for going on to get my bachelor's, because the shelter focuses on aiding low-income indigenous youth who live far from the state's educational institutions. Its founder's educational projects have made it possible for many indigenous youths like myself to continue their studies at different universities in Mexico and fulfill their dream of finishing a bachelor's degree.

Living together with young people from different parts of the North Sierra motivated me to study a bachelor's in law with an intercultural focus at Puebla State Intercultural University, an institution that has given me the tools I need to work for a decent life in indigenous communities. To my mind, participating in the 2019 seminar was the fruit of that formative process. The experience allowed me to realize that my high school's educational model is similar to Stanford's; that's why it's been very successful in educating and empowering indigenous students, because it promotes linking up education with day-to-day activities in the community and participating in productive workshops.

**Rosa Isela Cruz Vázquez**  
**Tutanakú from Cuantotola, Amixtlán, Puebla**

Today, basic education is not enough to survive. That's why the best option is to go to the university to become a professional. But not everybody has the same opportunities of access.

In my community, most of us young people believed that going to high school and then going out to work was the best life plan. When I enrolled in Digital High School 169, my goals changed: I began to want to study a bachelor's in architecture. But that was very hard

because my family didn't have the money. However, the Puebla State Intercultural University appeared as an option, offering quality teaching, and, what's even better, it was accessible for us. So, my older sister and I decided to study sustainable development. And that's how I found out that that life style is similar to that of first peoples, which is why we should also adopt that model.

I participated in the seminar, and there I discovered a new culture, a way of life that was very different from my country's, above all what life is like in my hometown. We were in an area where living conditions are better, but where there are also problems. When we went into some issues, it became clear that, although it shouldn't be that way, being indigenous means being vulnerable. And that's proven by many statistics.

I had the opportunity to go to classes at the prestigious university that hosted us, and there I learned about the problems that affect the entire world, as explained by very academically capable professors. This increased my interest in these issues, as well as in the research methods used. That's why I want to continue my studies and do a graduate course at a university like Stanford.

My going to university continues to be difficult for me and my parents, but the results will benefit not only my family, but also my community. And I'd like it if more young indigenous had the opportunity to continue with their studies. Paxtakatzinilh Stanford, nak xtakuwini kin natalan Tutunakú (Thank you Stanford, in the name of my Tutunadú brothers and sisters!).

### **Manuel Sánchez Pérez** **Tseltal from Bachajón, Chilón, Chiapas**

When I graduated from high school, I wanted to continue my university studies in the social sciences. However, I faced two main obstacles: first, there's no university in my town, and, second, the lack of financial resources. Given that challenge, I enrolled in the National Council to Foster Education (Conafe) with the aim of getting a scholarship when I finished to reach my goal. Today, I have a bachelor's in economics thanks to that scholarship, which I got after two years of community service with the council.

The Stanford summer seminar was my second experience abroad (before I had been on an academic exchange in Argentina). What made the biggest impression

**"This experience brings together brothers and sisters with aims similar to yours, like contributing to making the world better, a very difficult job."**

**JENNY MARIEL MARTÍNEZ LÓPEZ, Ch'ol**

on me at this seminar was seeing the economic and technological dynamism of the San Francisco Bay Area. When I heard that the California state gross domestic product is greater than that of all of Mexico, I was really surprised. The exchanges with wonderful professors and my indigenous and non-indigenous colleagues have also allowed me to be more inclusive and tolerant. I think that the real value of that seminar is that it brings such a diverse group together and contributes to reducing the gap between young people of both origins.

### **Raquel Juárez** **Totonac from Hueytlalpan, Puebla**

There is no doubt that, as dramatist Pierre Corneille said, "The greater the effort, the greater the glory." And I learned this when I was preparing to go to the university. I am very aware of it because, as a young indigenous woman, my ambition to study public administration and political science at the Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP) seemed absurd to my high school teachers, unattainable to my family, ridiculous to my friends, and was a huge challenge for me. So, one of my first glorious moments was showing that I was capable of getting what I had set out to get.

However, it didn't end there. One of the best experiences that I'll remember all my life is my summer stay at Stanford. To get there, I had to make an effort. But, I'm convinced that every step was worth it. And I don't mean just the academic side of things, but also how valuable and enriching it was to learn about other cultures like the [U.S.] American or that of Kazakhstan—even though I only heard about the latter.

Working with students from the ITAM and from several states around the country showed me the importance of analyzing a problem from different perspectives and that using our abilities for a common end will always be fruitful for everyone.

Wa yuma tu jkikatsil yankaxli neklakgkapastaka! Paxcatsinixl! (I will always remember what I learned! Thank you!)

**Silvino Arellanes Hernández**  
Zapotec from San Pablo Güilá, Oaxaca

Being able to study at a university is the best. And you have to give yourself goals, to have a concrete objective and not give up, since, as we know, being an indigenous student at a university involves lots of challenges, such as managing the little money you have well, sacrificing a lot of things you want, like having certain luxuries that you see in a world that's different from our communities. Also, you have to look for different kinds of scholarships to cover the expenses that come with studying.

Participating in the seminar has been a huge opportunity for me as an indigenous student; it's allowed me to learn new things, like about the different kinds of violence, how they come about, and the way criminal organizations operate, just to mention a few. Being with the ITAM students was very enjoyable, since we had interesting exchanges of ideas. Also, getting a closer look at U.S. culture was incredible because there, they respect rules and norms and they are applied lawfully.

**Andrea Domitila Marcial Santiago**  
Zapotec from Oaxaca

It seemed impossible—even otherworldly—to have the chance to visit Stanford University, to learn new things from professors from one of the most prestigious institutions, and even to go to another country.

When they gave us the results of the competition for the scholarship, I was surprised that I had qualified, that

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ROSA ISELA CRUZ VÁZQUEZ, Tutanakú

all my efforts to get to where I am today were beginning to show results. For me, the transit from high school to the university brought many challenges, both economic and emotional. However, I always found a way and a new road forward.

I'm an undergraduate law student at the Vasconcelos University in the state of Oaxaca. My dad is from the municipality of Tlacolula de Matamoros. I was born there, but I grew up in Capulálpam de Méndez, where my mom is from; so, I'm proud of being a native of both towns. I realized that the opportunity to participate in this seminar does change lives. At Stanford, we worked with five young people from the ITAM, which was very interesting since, for those weeks, we put to one side the stereotypes and prejudices that society imposes on us and generated a quite dynamic, enriching communication and closeness.

I also had the opportunity to look at the other side of the coin and see how people live in San Francisco and San Jose, both cities located in a country that is very attractive for everyone, like the United States. I observed that many Mexicans who live there work long days, mostly in restaurants and malls, and that it's not like we in Mexico imagine it to be. I would go so far as to say that their work is twice as hard and, in some places, it's even badly paid. But even so, they do their best to send a large part of their paychecks to Mexico to their families.

In addition to that, the research and other information the Stanford professors shared with us made me think even more about the impact on our society of the global risks in Latin America. It might seem like it's not the case, but all the personal information we share as Internet users, on social media, is involved, and very much so.

That experience has opened a huge door in my life. I discovered that it wasn't so difficult to make one of my biggest goals a reality, that nothing is impossible, and that every effort and all your dedication will always be worth it.

**Jenny Mariel Martínez López**  
Ch'ol from Oxolotán, Tacotalpa, Tabasco

Talking with my friends from the seminar, we thought, “And if we talk about what happens after such a wonderful experience?” We would all think that after finishing

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such an important program as Stanford's, things would be better for us and for our communities so many things come to mind that you could put into practice.

But things aren't always what we expect. When you come back, you're faced with your reality, with challenges like certain conflicts at work —they don't pay the double shifts you worked so hard to finish "because you weren't there"— or others with the authorities in your community because they say, "How can you go around saying that there's violence in the community?" The problem is that people don't know what's behind a Facebook photo, and you're always going to share the happiest moments, because why would you share the negative things like stress or not getting enough sleep? Why place so much importance on them?

It's important to say how we experienced the process. At least for me it wasn't easy, since it not only implied getting through red tape to apply (providing documents, filling out the application, a letter to explain your motivations, recommendation letters, etc.); you also had to deal with the lack of access to technology because we live in communities where we often don't have these services.

Imagine the worry of knowing that at any moment an urgent e-mail could arrive and you wouldn't be able to respond right away because the local Internet service was down; also the worry because of economic conditions, because, although it doesn't cost much to apply, every step involves expenses. In my case, after finding out that I had gone on to the second stage, my mind was already asking where I would have to go. I'm not complaining; each of us was aware that we had to make an effort and that was part of the process.

A lot of other things are involved, but they're no longer important because I can say with full certainty that I would never regret having participated in this seminar. It contributes to the development of critical thinking, of deepening your understanding, analyzing, studying, and proposing solutions in line with what's needed. It prepares you to deal with the challenges that will come after the program is over. But not only that: it also introduces you to important people, not because of their economic status, but because of their commitment to society, their great hearts, and their dedication to everything they do.

All of this not only brings you knowledge but also many brothers and sisters with aims similar to yours, like contributing to making the world better, a very difficult job, but that, by creating networks and joining forces, we will be able to achieve.

I finish this paragraph by sharing how happy and proud I feel of my roots, thankful to God for having allowed me to be born in a family full of culture, with parents who have supported me throughout. Käk'ēñ wokolix yälä kux-tyäle! (Thanks be to life!) **VM**



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