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Entre Amigos: 50 Years of Amistad — A model of global community

BY **MARTÍN PANTOJA AGUILAR, PH.D. / FOR THE ASHLAND AMIGO CLUB** August 20, 2018

Editor's Note: Today's guest columnist is an Amistad student exchange alumnus from Guanajuato, Mexico, who received a Master of Arts in 1990 from Southern Oregon State College (present-day SOU). In Guanajuato, he became a top administrator at the University of Guanajuato, serving as administrator secretary 2003-2011, director of international relations (1999-2003) and finance director 1997-1999). He has returned to Ashland 20 times for official and academic affairs and to visit the host family he "adopted" as a student.



Martín Pantoja Aguilar, PhD

The Amistad student exchange program was born when the presidents of Southern Oregon State College and the University of Guanajuato signed a formal agreement of academic exchange and cooperation in 1969. At the same time, Ashland and Guanajuato initiated Sister City relations and supportive Amigo Clubs were founded.

Next year the universities and cities will be celebrating their 50th anniversary of people-to-people and country-to-country friendship.

Several characteristics of the relationship differentiate it from other collaborative efforts between U.S. and Mexican universities, including its longevity, comprehensive internationalization, strategic senior management exchanges, and the involvement of government.

Over the years, nearly 700 students have benefited from the exchange program. The students from Mexico receive either bachelor or master's degrees at SOU recognized by both universities, and the SOU students studying in Guanajuato receive mutually recognized credits for curricular, cultural and language courses. All students have an opportunity to participate in academic internships and community work.

Another 300 academics and administrators have participated in Amistad, improving language skills, joining regional-impact research projects and forming academic consortiums to develop joint curricula and double-degree master's programs. Senior managers of the universities have collaborated in strategic planning and development of core projects at both institutions.

The cities of Ashland and Guanajuato have been essential factors in the exchange collaboration, welcoming and integrating into their communities the students, professors and executives of the universities.

A family atmosphere has captivated participants and resulted in lifetime relationships, including, at last count, 81 bi-cultural marriages. Through the years, host-family relationships have grown into "true-families," including reciprocal visits and attendance at events such as birthday celebrations, weddings, baptisms, graduation ceremonies, and more. Connie and Richard Alexander were my family away from home.

Today, there are Guanajuato alumni of SOU who have stayed to live and work in the Rogue Valley and Ashland alumni of the University of Guanajuato who have returned to Guanajuato to live.

Amistad students have obtained key positions in city, state and federal levels that include governors, judicial magistrates, senior government, university and company executives, successful entrepreneurs, high quality professors, and renowned researchers.

The U.S. Embassy in Mexico has stated it considers the Amistad Program a unique and exemplary model of collaboration between Mexico and the United States.

Ashland and Guanajuato have created a jewel that has served three generations, with the grandchildren of the first exchange students participating in exchanges.

We must keep this model alive for more than another 50 years. This is the model of friendship — Amistad — that our countries need today. It is a model that builds lifelong friendship and goes beyond the simple discourse of international cooperation and creates a true global community.

It is a friendship that continues to unite not only universities, but also cities, states and countries, bringing two cultures and neighbors closer together.

Amigo Club's Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears on the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.