

A NETWORK THAT GROWS FROM CLASSROOMS TO TERRITORIES: WEAVING KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTIONS FROM STUDENT VOICES



UNIVERSIDAD DE CHILE

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With the student testimonies of:

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Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga, Colombia

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The Starting Point: When Learning Becomes Action

This e-book brings together voices from different parts of Latin America that speak from the same impulse: to understand how the university can transform both professional training and the territories surrounding it. In these pages, stories of students and graduates who, from different disciplines, contexts, and accents, have found in the university experience a way to commit to the common good.

From the classrooms of Bucaramanga, Colima, Lima, and Santiago, projects emerge that transcend the academic. María Thereza, María Lucía, and Diana, from Colombia, participated in initiatives in which the Law became a tool for inclusion and the defense of human rights. Florangel, Shirley, and José César, from Peru, brought their legal knowledge to environmental defense. In Mexico, Nancy and her classmates at the University of Colima learned from bees and local beekeepers.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

In Chile, María Jesús and Nicolás from the University of Chile accompanied women entrepreneurs seeking to strengthen their projects and autonomy, demonstrating that innovation can also have a social and everyday face.

Although their trajectories are developed in different countries, these experiences share the same orientation: the desire to learn by doing, to build knowledge with others, and for the university not to limit itself to observing reality, but to transform it together with those who inhabit it.

What is presented here are not only academic projects, but significant trajectories that leave a mark on those who participate and on the communities with which they are linked. They are stories that show how higher education, by entering the territory, can also be a space of hope and transformation.

Between Worlds: The EPIC Interface as a Space for Cooperation and Translation Practices

How do we collaborate when problems no longer fit into a single sector, ministry, or discipline? How do we talk between those who speak different languages, the technical, the political, the community, and the academic, and yet share the same urgency? In times of complex challenges, of the so-called Perverse Problems, with multiple agendas, universities and communities are looking for new ways of thinking and acting together. Where does this encounter take place? What makes it possible?

The EPIC Model emerges as a concrete answer to that question: an agile and lively way to articulate efforts, to intertwine conversations between worlds that previously advanced in parallel. Its proposal is simple in appearance, but profound in its effects: to connect the existing capacities of universities – their advanced human capital, their areas of knowledge, networks, laboratories, libraries, courses, teachers, and students – with the real needs of the territories.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

Rather than creating new structures, EPIC-N proposes to activate those that already exist, to make them speak to one another and to orient them towards a common purpose. In this logic, the university ceases to be a distant observer and becomes an actor in the territory.

Classrooms are opened; teams and courses expand to the municipalities, the fields, the streets. Students learn from experience, and knowledge becomes shared action. What was once an academic project is becoming a civic practice.

The Logic of the Interface

In technical terms, EPIC works as an interface, but not just any interface, one that translates, synchronizes, and creates meaning between worlds that do not typically speak. In computing, an interface is the union that is established between two independent systems to allow communication and joint operation. For example, the keyboard converts keystrokes into words, the microphone converts voice into data, and the cloud icon opens a universe of invisible files.

The same thing happens with the EPIC Model.

The interface is the relational space in which the university, the state, and the communities learn to work together without losing their identities. There, the academic calendar meets the territory's rhythms; technical reports dialogue with local stories; diagnoses become conversations. EPIC-N acts as a mediation ecosystem, where existing structures – faculties, offices, and centers – are activated, translated, and reoriented towards the commons.

These types of mediations serve as cognitive and social bridges, transforming information into action. Along these lines, the EPIC Model resembles figures that do not impose a single vision but rather expand the range of possible alternatives and make the decision margins visible.

Instead of saying "what to do," it opens the space for us to decide together how to do it.

In practice, this translates into the roles of EPIC University Managers and EPIC Municipality Managers, true mobilizers who mediate between university catalogs and local priorities, between classrooms and city councils, between ideas and urgencies. But they do not act alone; students, teachers, civil servants, and professionals are involved. Each meeting, each workshop, each field visit becomes an interface node, where knowledge circulates in both directions.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

The testimonies explain it clearly. When a group of law students in Peru works alongside prosecutors to protect the environment, or when young people in Mexico learn from local beekeepers about pollen variations, the interface is the conversation that brings them together. As one student recalls:

"The methodology designed for the research required the active and constant participation of the entire team, which favored a harmonious collaboration between us... We could strengthen mutual trust and ties with key actors in the community."

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

That trust is the raw material of the interface. Thus, the EPIC interface not only translates languages but also translates worlds. And in this daily practice of translating, listening, and building together, EPIC redefines the role of the university, where, before, the academy kept its distance from the expert; EPIC invites you to learn with communities and not just about them. Methodological tools cease to be protocols and become links. The results, rather than products, are processes of mutual recognition.

A Model That Translates and Amplifies

In Latin America, the EPIC Model has acquired a pulse of its own. Here, universities are not only looking for efficiency or management, but also for reparation, justice, and recognition. Each university alliance with a community becomes a space where situated knowledge dialogues with technical languages and meanings, negotiating combinations of methodological, political, and everyday sensitivities. It is at this intersection – between the academic, the community, and the everyday – that EPIC comes to life: articulating diverse perspectives, resources, and times to produce concrete impact on people's lives.

Challenging the Traditional Idea of Academia

One of the most visible lessons learned in the network's projects is the displacement of the university from its traditional role as an external agent, challenging the inherited conception that academia is the only generator of knowledge and proposing a different relationship with the territories, one in which all actors know, contribute, and teach.

"The most relevant learning was to consolidate a position that challenges the traditional conception of academia as the only generator of knowledge. This experience allowed me to discover the opposite: it was the community that, through its experiences and knowledge, contributed invaluable knowledge, and the academy acted as a bridge that facilitated exchange and joint construction."



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

In this mutual recognition, the university stops talking about the community and starts talking to it. Knowledge becomes a two-way process, in which theory is reviewed in the light of experience and practice is enriched by reflection.

Collaborating to Integrate Perspectives

Once that epistemological distance is reduced, collaboration emerges as a substantive practice. The case of Colombia demonstrates this powerfully. At the Autonomous University of Bucaramanga, the EPIC Model served as a framework for building peace through shared knowledge. The projects served as meeting spaces for victims, ex-combatants, public servants, and grassroots organizations. Knowledge has become a tool for social and political reconstruction and a means to make visible what had previously remained fragmented.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

"This collaborative approach resulted in a greater integration of diverse perspectives, which favored the creation of a more inclusive and participatory environment. In terms of its final impact, the project helped consolidate and give visibility to the opinions of multiple grassroots organizations. This allowed for a more comprehensive and plural approach to reparation, in which all voices were heard."

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

From these processes, collaboration ceases to be an operational exercise and becomes a way of producing collective knowledge and rebuilding social bonds. Conditions are created for different perspectives to coexist and be recognized as necessary.

Influencing and Transforming from Cooperation

The next step in this journey is advocacy, when collaboration begins to leave traces beyond the teams that originated it. It is the point at which teaching and research enter the public sphere, transforming into collective action and concrete politics. In this transition, EPIC projects act as bridges that connect knowledge with decision and the classroom with civic life.

At the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, a group of law professors and students worked alongside environmental prosecutors to protect wetlands threatened by urban sprawl. What began as an academic project became a concrete intervention and collaboration in local policies and the institutional practice of environmental justice. Law became a tool for ecological defense, and learning became a means to modify public decisions.

"The importance of interdisciplinarity and an intercultural approach (...) as well as to talk to those with whom we influence. To continue impacting and sharing what actions are taken from academia and the importance of cooperation between institutions and civil society."

— *Florangel Camargo, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*

The Peruvian experience shows how EPIC-N amplifies not by repeating, but by extending the effects of learning towards public management, cooperation networks, and collective decisions. The interface, by operating as a space for translation between actors, also becomes a structure for advocacy; it becomes a mechanism that circulates knowledge between different levels and allows ideas to become action.

The training spaces are instances in which learning is built in relation to the territory and with actors external to the university environment, shifting the emphasis from the transmission of content towards situated experiences.

“During these spaces, the importance of the academy was consistently highlighted, and for students to listen to the community, Students left the classrooms to encounter reality and reconfigure their understanding of the territory and their future professional roles. In addition, the city authorities, as public policy decision-makers in the context of the socialization of the results of our research projects, highlighted their importance and relevance for the adoption and implementation of public policies.”

— *María Rivero, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*



María Rivero's testimony offers a key to understanding the relational dimension of advocacy: cooperation is not limited to signing agreements or transferring reports, but to building trust, legitimacy, and continuity between the university, the State, and the community. Where disciplinary or institutional boundaries often fragment action, EPIC-N projects weave a standard fabric.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

In short, a first step toward leaving a successful imprint is to learn to share responsibility for current needs and priorities. It is to recognize that the most lasting transformations do not come from a single institution, but from alliances that sustain listening, respect, and co-create. When the university acts in concert with others, knowledge ceases to be an end and becomes a public force and a tool for building the future.

The Beginnings: Motivations, Encounters, and Horizons of the Student Body

The Starting Point

Every project starts with a question. Sometimes, as simple as What do I expect from this? Others, more profound: Why do I study what I study? Who can use what I am learning? This is how the experiences that make up this writing today are born: curiosity, the search, and the desire to set knowledge in motion.

Every story begins with an intuition. Not always with a plan, nor with a precise map, but with that impulse that pushes you to take the first step. This is how students came to EPIC projects: some out of curiosity, others out of vocation, others out of a mixture of both.

Some wanted to live their careers "in practice," to see whether theory held up to reality. Others sought to contribute something to the territory they came from, to give back what they had learned. Some felt the urge to get involved in something collective, not quite knowing what they would find.

"I hoped to learn about the interaction between beekeeping practices and biodiversity, as well as generate a positive impact by proposing strategies that would benefit local producers. I also hoped to strengthen my skills in field research and scientific analysis."

— *Student, Universidad de Colima.*

Amid this diversity of motivations, the pulse of a generation unsatisfied with mere observation can be felt. They are young people who want to get involved and suspect that learning makes more sense when they experiment with others.

This is how one student expressed it when recalling her beginnings in the project:

"My motivation to get involved in this project has a deeply personal root. I was born in Cúcuta, a city marked by policies that, historically, have looked at Catatumbo as a distant, forgotten, and stigmatized territory. For years, I had only heard about Catatumbo through prejudices and stigmas. This research allowed me to understand its dynamics and explore how, from its own actors, we could contribute to rebuilding a healthier and more supportive social fabric."

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

Her testimony reveals one of the deepest engines of these experiences: María was not only looking to fulfill a university internship; she sought to reconcile with her own territory. Her story illuminates the meaning of this section: to look at the beginnings, the whys and wherefores of those who decided to participate.

Expectations and First Approaches

The initial motivations were not always loaded with big words. Some were simple *"to see how what we learn in class works in real life"*, *"to contribute to my career"*, *"to understand how decisions are made that change things."*

"I was convinced that it would be a space for constant learning and openness to new knowledge about law in action and environmental issues. In my volunteer role, I wanted to contribute in whatever way I could. I hoped that the projects would be points of impact in the academic, environmental, and social spheres."

— *Shirley Bautista, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*

In her story, the expectation is to participate, "to be part of something bigger." What began as a requirement becomes a commitment; what was a task becomes purpose. As José remembers it, it was a turning point:

"It gave me more hope about the role of community work. I met students and professionals committed to fighting the environmental problems in our country. The experience reinforced my interest in getting involved and contributing through actions aimed at protecting the environment."

— *José Remigio, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*

In those words, we move from expectations to conviction. What at first seemed like a professional opportunity becomes an ethical position. José doesn't just observe community work; he recognizes himself within it. In his voice, you can see the transition from expectation to conviction, from the idea of "learning" to that of "committing".

Similarly, Nancy Flores, a Mexican chemist, describes the process with the serenity of someone who discovers that science also adds value:

"It has allowed beekeepers to obtain particular data on their products, giving added value to them, in addition to knowing the safe locations for their hives. In the meetings, we share experiences for the benefit of the entire community. Beekeepers taught us as much as we taught them."

— Nancy Flores, *Universidad de Colima*.



Photo credits: Universidad de Colima

Her story shows that collaboration does not detract from scientific rigor but adds depth and meaning. In this exchange between hives and laboratories, data acquisition context and scientific practice are recognized as part of a broader network of knowledge.

The initial expectation of "*doing science*" is transformed into something greater: understanding that all knowledge, even the most specialized, generates value when it is shared, discussed, and linked to other ways of knowing. Nancy not only measured samples but also built relationships, bonds, and reciprocal learning.

And in this gesture, science ceases to be a closed field and becomes a familiar territory.

The Echo of the Lived

As the days go by, the motivations expand. Unexpected bonds appear, new friendships are formed, and ideas are shared. The project becomes a plot in which emotion and experience go hand in hand. From Colombia, María Lucía narrates it with the strength of someone who witnessed that meeting:

"The first activity of the University Action Program for Migration marked my life: a brigade of humanitarian and psychosocial attention to the Venezuelan migrant population. Seeing the happy faces of these people when they received food, attention, and medical care was exciting, because it reaffirmed to me that it was worth betting on this initiative."

— *María Lucía Rivero, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

Also in Peru, a similar emotion is described:

"It was an enriching experience in terms of feedback, updating, and learning knowledge...applying various legal tools through real cases that the students at the CJA have developed."

— *Shirley Bautista, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*

Behind their words, there is more than gratitude: there is recognition, belonging, and community. So, for many, these projects were the place where they found meaning. Some call it a vocation, others, discovery. But in all of them, a thread is repeated, the certainty that it is worth participating.

In their stories, the students mention both the results and what changed in them, that is, the way of looking, listening, and getting involved. Their initial motivations, so different from each other, converge into something common: that moment when university opens and ceases to train only professionals to accompany life trajectories.

Student Actions that Give Meaning

Now, we will briefly examine the tasks and responsibilities students assumed within the projects and the values these practices mobilize. And what they do is not accessory or auxiliary tasks; they are activities that have a real impact on communities, institutions, and territories.

Actions that Generate Knowledge

EPIC-N projects showcase a wide range of activities that integrate science, law, management, and community participation. In Mexico, the team from the University of Colima developed an applied research work with beekeepers:



Photo credits: Universidad de Colima

"We collect and prepare pollen samples; we perform microscopic analyses to identify plant species in honey samples; We write reports and disseminate the results in the community."

— *Student, Universidad de Colima.*

These technical actions link scientific precision with environmental care. Nancy Flores expands on the description, showing the level of depth and commitment of the work:

"We determine the botanical origin of the pollen collected, measure ecological richness and diversity, identify phenols and flavonoids using chromatographic techniques, quantify heavy metals and pesticides, and relate these data to decisions to obtain a safer and more nutritious product."

— *Nancy Flores, Universidad de Colima.*

Scientific work thus becomes a practice of responsibility: research to care, not just to know. Each analysis, in this example, represents an ethical decision about food security, ecosystem health, and local sustainability.

Actions that Strengthen Justice and Institutional Collaboration

In the legal field, students are incorporated into processes aimed at strengthening transparency, justice, and access to rights. Shirley Bautista describes the tasks she took on within the Environmental Legal Clinic (CJA):

"I was supporting the case of the Antiforest Law. The objective included a report on this topic, emphasizing the key points of the repercussions and visualizing issues associated with that law and how it can impact environmental issues..."

— *Shirley Bautista, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

Her colleague José Remigio complements this view, emphasizing the relationship between legal practice and the public good:

"We analyzed the regulations on wildlife to identify gaps; we participated in meetings with specialists; we presented progress; we drafted a request for access to public information to the Regional Government of Loreto; and we traveled to Madre de Dios to learn about the illicit trafficking of wildlife."

— José Remigio, *Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú*.

These stories show that legal practice is not a simulation or an abstract exercise. It is a practice situated in public life that trains students in the defense of common goods, transparent management, and interdisciplinary work. Every concrete action, such as researching, arguing, asking for information, traveling to the countryside, becomes an act of active citizenship.

Actions that Weave Community

In Colombia, students from the Autonomous University of Bucaramanga participated in research projects on peace and memory. María Valencia sums it up in a description that combines the academic, the organizational, and the relational:

"I was part of the elaboration of theoretical documents that supported the conceptual basis of the study and participated in the planning and organization of focus groups and interviews. These meetings with the actors of the territory were essential not only for gathering information but also for establishing close,

respectful relationships. In addition, we organized a scientific event that brought together key actors in the territory to share advances and strengthen ties with the community."

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

In this type of experience, the value lies not only in the research product but also in the process of listening, coordinating, facilitating, and sustaining the conversation. Each meeting, each interview, and each event are ways to build trust, understanding, and peace from university practice.

Actions that Teach Leadership



Photo credits: Universidad de Chile

From Chile, María Chacón brings a perspective that integrates management, teaching, and communication:

"I participated as a representative of SODEUCH, working on planning and coordination with teachers and general objectives. I also taught classes on communication skills."

— *María Chacón, Universidad de Chile.*

This type of experience shows that leadership is not vertical, but collaborative and formative. Students lead while they learn, guiding processes, accompanying peers, and creating conditions for participation.

The Learning Plot: Shared Experiences, Links, and Knowledge

In EPIC projects, learning is never an isolated act. It happens in conversation, in error, in practice, and in shared emotion. The classroom extends into the territory, and the territory returns to the university a living and learning practice that does not fit on the margins of a rubric.

Each EPIC project demonstrates that learning is an integral process: it combines reason and sensitivity, thought and action, theory and practice. Through diverse methodologies from Problem-Based Learning (PBL) to Service Learning (A+S), through Project-Based Learning (PBL), Clinical Teaching, or Communities of Practice, students experience education as a web of bonds, challenges, and discoveries. More than applying techniques, they learn to inhabit knowledge, to dialogue with other worlds, to build collective meaning in the face of the fundamental problems of the environment.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

At the heart of these processes, learning takes on multiple dimensions, which are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, such as:

- Academic and disciplinary: they consolidate theories, concepts, and methodologies applied in authentic contexts, transforming the contents into tools for action.
- Professional and practical: they develop skills in analysis, planning, management, and collaborative resolution of social and organizational problems.
- Interpersonal and relational: strengthen empathy, communication, and active listening within diverse communities of practice.
- Ethical and emotional: they recognize the value of care, reciprocity, and social responsibility in the construction of shared knowledge.
- Vital and transformative: it generates changes in perspective and purpose, accompanying personal trajectories beyond the project.

Learning, within these projects, begins long before anyone recognizes it as such. The students arrive with a backpack full of theories, methods, and concepts; they know about law, economics, chemistry, and management. But when they meet local actors, communities, and their rhythms. They discover that knowledge does not always resemble what they learned in class.

In these spaces, knowledge meets. Learning ceases to be a disciplinary exchange to become a dialogue between ways of life, between scientific knowledge and popular knowledge, between the written word and oral memory, between the expert gaze and everyday experience.

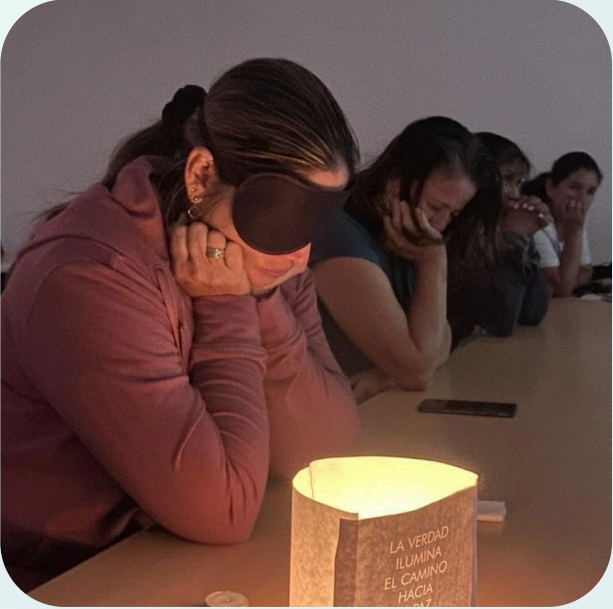


Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

"I learned that peacebuilding and the strengthening of community processes are achieved when that knowledge is valued, enhanced, and articulated with academic knowledge, in a joint and collaborative work."

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

It is no longer only interdisciplinary; it becomes living transdisciplinarity. It becomes a practice that recognizes the limits of science and the value of situated experience as a source of understanding and action. Nancy Flores, from Mexico, experienced this fusion between science and trade when she worked with beekeepers in her region:

"I have learned the wonders of beekeeping; The extensive knowledge of beekeepers is admirable, and their willingness to share it with the academic community is very enriching (...) It has been very positive, and I am very pleased to work on a project that will not remain in a laboratory or only be written in a scientific article, but that transcends walls and brings a direct benefit to the communities that need it, and in turn allows my professional development."

— *Nancy Flores, Universidad de Colima.*

At these crossroads, the understanding is shown that learning is not conquering knowledge but inhabiting it together with others. The honey they analyze in the laboratory is impregnated with stories, ancestral practices, climates, affections, and by recognizing this, science gains context, faces, and meanings.

In that dialogue, Nancy understands that laboratory data is not enough to understand the life of bees: each hive reflects an ecosystem of practices, climates, and affections. Science, by opening itself to these narratives, gains context, sensitivity, and public sense.

This type of experience not only broadens the methods of learning, but also its ethical horizon. In the face of a world undergoing accelerated and profound social transformations, where biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and big data reconfigure economies, jobs, rights, and bonds, these initiatives teach a fundamental lesson: thinking about complexity through diversity. In times of critical transitions – social, energy, water, and food – students understand that no single discipline can address the challenges of sustainable development alone.

“I learned to understand and value different realities and needs that motivate the participants' ventures. I also learned the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, as our team of professors includes students from the faculties of Economics and Business, Law, and Philosophy, as well as administrators of the University and staff of the Municipality of Santiago, all working together to deliver high-quality training to entrepreneurs.”

— *María Chacón, Universidad de Chile.*



Photo credits: Universidad de Chile

From there arises an epistemic humility: recognizing that science needs to converse with politics, with citizens, and with local experience. It is learning to design solutions without losing the ability to listen, to build knowledge as an exercise of shared responsibility. Nancy expressed it lucidly:

"I only thought about my professional development; I did not expect that the interaction with the communities would give me so much learning."

— *Nancy Flores, Universidad de Colima.*

That phrase condenses a change of scale: from individual motivation to collective consciousness. Learning no longer means accumulating knowledge, but linking knowledge with commitment, understanding that all scientific or social action contributes, even in small ways, to defining trajectories for a just transition. José Remigio, in Peru, experienced it when studying the illicit trafficking of wildlife:

"I learned that illegal wildlife trafficking is a bigger problem than I thought and that there are many competent and courageous people interested in wildlife protection."

— *José Remigio, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*



Photo credits: Universidad de Colima

All the testimonies reveal that learning does not end in the classroom or in the discipline; it continues in how global challenges are taken up from local realities. The technical becomes ethical, research, and action:

"I learned to listen, above all else. Often, from the role of academia, we approach communities to talk only about anthropological theory and studies, laws, and the research articles we write. When, in reality, the role we have is precisely that of being community collaborators, putting our knowledge at their service and, together with their experience and knowledge, generate opportunities that really affect their daily lives and their vocation in life."

— *Diana Sarmiento, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

Listening here becomes a form of knowledge. In active listening, knowledge ceases to be the teacher's property and becomes a shared process, a bridge between worlds. EPIC projects invite us to move from theory to situated collaboration, where academic knowledge is recontextualized at the service of people and territories. What Diana describes is not just a methodological shift, but an epistemic transformation: from expert to collaborator, from discourse to dialogue, from competition to cooperation.

"I hoped to deliver knowledge and practical tools, but I also gained personal growth by learning about their stories and challenges; that enriched my perspective."

— *María Chacón, Universidad de Chile.*

What Maria points out is a less visible but essential dimension of learning: self-formation. Her testimony reminds us that every educational process is, at the same time, a process of self-knowledge. Each encounter broadens understanding, but also sensitivity. Each conversation changes the way we look at what we thought we knew. In this shared experience, a pedagogy of reciprocity is embodied: learning with others to transform with them. Epistemic humility, in this sense, does not consist in doubting everything, but in learning to doubt well, recognizing the limits of one's own knowledge to open space for dialogue, listening, and cooperation.

Each project, each interaction, becomes an essay on how to live together in difference, how to collectively think about solutions to common problems, and how to make the technical, the ethical, and the academic vital.



Photo credits: Universidad de Colima

How We Face Challenges: Sustaining Ourselves in Community

The experiences that gave life to this writing were not always easy. Each project faced its own challenges, such as deadlines—which sometimes seemed unreachable—logistical unforeseen events, difficult silences, or fatigue. But in that fragility, something profoundly educational emerged, the awareness that learning implies sustaining oneself and being sustained.

To sustain is not only to resist; it is a verb that combines care, interdependence, and hope. It implies sustaining a purpose when one's strength fails, supporting the other when hesitating, allowing oneself to be sustained when oneself breaks. In this reciprocity, the group becomes more than a work team: they become a community of support and meaning. Fragility, in this framework, does not appear as an obstacle but as a pedagogical space, where individual security is disarmed, and the awareness of the common emerges: the certainty that no formative process is sustained in solitude.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

Several student voices describe this learning process as a shift from the expectation of individual control to the acceptance—not always comfortable—of interdependence. In this process, teamwork was not without its tensions. As one student points out:

“It was complicated to coordinate efforts and maintain a common focus, since some members prioritized individual objectives.”

— *Student, Universidad de Colima.*

However, these difficulties did not halt the processes but rather forced a collective reconfiguration:

“We were able to overcome the difficulties by creating more opportunities to exchange viewpoints and organizing among organizations.”

— *Nicolás Ayara, Universidad de Chile.*

Within this framework, learning to work together involved recognizing that community processes are not sustained by homogeneity, but by the articulation of differences. Similarly, María Lucía Rivero (Autonomous University of Bucaramanga) highlights that, despite the initial challenges, the “joint and interdisciplinary work” and “the sum of efforts” allowed the achievement of results with social impact, with “teamwork being the key to success”.

Each group brought together people from different disciplines, years of training, ages, languages, and expectations. Coordination was not an operational procedure but a laboratory of coexistence; the students learned to build agreements, define responsibilities, and, above all, recognize strengths.

"To improve teamwork, we encouraged clearer and more consistent communication, assigning specific roles and responsibilities to each member, which helped align our efforts."which helped align our efforts."

— *Student, Universidad de Colima.*

Therefore, the most complex obstacles listed by the students were rarely technical or academic in nature. They often involved the human aspect: learning to manage time, reconciling the demands of the project with the academic load, working in real-world contexts with uncertainty, or deploying first-rate socio-emotional and professional practice skills, such as active listening, empathy, or collaborative conflict resolution.

Far from breaking the processes, these situations became spaces for growth, where each difficulty operated as a lesson on how to sustain oneself in the collective.

"I think the most difficult thing was to understand that I didn't have the psychosocial tools for certain moments, but we looked to art and memory for a refuge to channel the pain."

— *Diana Sarmiento,
Universidad Autónoma de
Bucaramanga.*

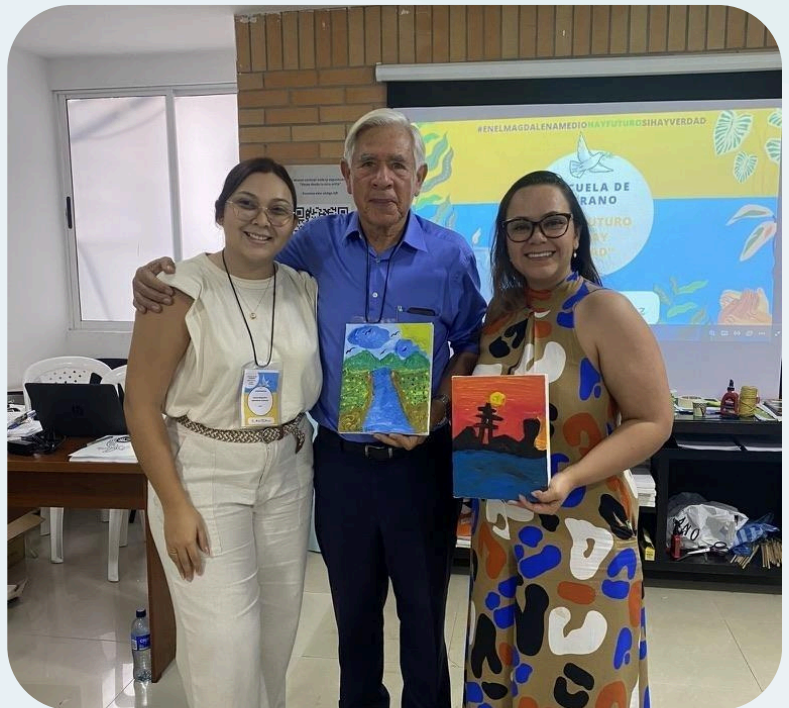


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That shared vulnerability activated teamwork and mutual care. They learned to stand among peers, to celebrate achievements together, and to transform mistakes into experience.

"We had to adjust, and that taught us to prioritize, to trust that the other would comply, to communicate better."

— *María Chacón, Universidad de Chile.*

"To overcome these challenges, I learned how to manage time, organize my activities, and prioritize tasks. These tools, that I acquired thanks to participation in the project, have allowed me to stand out both academically and professionally."

— *María Rivero, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

If there is one thing that unites all voices, it is the awareness that learning is not about domination but about trust. Trust in classmates, teachers, communities, and the university that supports them. Collaboration does not require uniformity; it is not about thinking alike, but about walking together towards a common purpose, and in that shared walk, differences can become a source of creativity rather than conflict. This specific description contains a greater learning: organization as a form of care. Coordinating as an act of empathy means anticipating the other's tiredness, adjusting rhythms, and recognizing that each collective process has its own *tempo*.

In pedagogical terms, this work embodies the logic of collaborative learning, knowledge acquired through interaction, co-creation, and deliberation.

Collaboration does not consist in distributing tasks, but in multiplying meaning.

"It is also possible to highlight that teamwork and the synergies built were important to achieve common objectives. The organization and proactivity of each member were remarkable."

— *Shirley Bautista, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*



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Leadership, then, ceased to be understood as hierarchical, vertical management and became something distributed and horizontal. In this transition, the groups even became communities of practice, spaces where differences ceased to be obstacles and became a source of learning.

Amid these dynamics, the role of teachers is crucial. Teachers who did not appear only as content transmitters but also took care of these processes. They were mediators between the university and the territory and between the students and their own boundaries.

"Our teacher helped us to improve in the technical aspects, but he also taught us to listen to each other, to trust in what we could do as a team."

— *Student, Universidad de Colima.*

This accompaniment enabled the maintenance of a common horizon when tensions arose and ensured that learning remained an experience of growth rather than exhaustion. In the EPIC framework, the teaching figure contributes significantly to pedagogical sustainability, ensuring that the link does not depend on voluntarism but on structures for reflection, evaluation, and well-being.

Let Education be Higher

When reflecting on their experiences, the students who participated in the EPIC Model projects agreed on one certainty: this type of experience should no longer be the exception but become a structural part of university education. It is not just a matter of adding a field module or a course with a social component, but of rethinking the very way the university relates to learning, society, and knowledge.

Many expressed it clearly: if anything transforms these experiences, it is that they connect theory with life, concepts with bodies, classrooms with territories.

The Desire to Stay

The recommendations that emerge from the testimonies are, at the same time, proposals for sustainability. All this was possible because the university did not observe from afar; they accompanied the faculties, teaching teams, and the EPIC network, offering guidance, spaces, resources, and, above all, validation.

"We always feel supported," many students repeat. Support to try, make mistakes, and start again. This feeling of support is a form of institutional trust, the recognition that learning is not measured only in results, but also in processes, links, and experiences. Behind every successful project, is an institution that accompanied, validated, and recognized.

However, the participants themselves know that keeping these experiences alive requires more than enthusiasm or will: it requires structure, accompaniment, and continuity. Collaboration with communities should not depend on individual commitment but be protected by university policies that guarantee their permanence, legitimacy, and articulation.

"Strengthen institutional support in future projects and thereby demonstrate the importance of universities' role in accompanying the Clinic's projects."

— *Shirley Bautista, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*

Shirley's observation points to a mature understanding of what it means to make a model sustainable. Sustainability in higher education is always multidimensional: it encompasses the structural, pedagogical, cultural, financial, and symbolic. It implies building institutional mechanisms that ensure continuity and coherence between the university's mission and daily practices, integrating experiences of connection with the environment into the curricula, recognizing their formative value; and strengthening collaboration networks that sustain an academic culture committed to society.



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In the field of university management, it is understood that sustainability is not guaranteed solely by resources, but by strategic coherence: when practice and policy point in the same direction, and training processes are aligned with the values the institution declares. A sustainable university keeps its purpose alive and translates it into policies, incentives, and structures that sustain it over time. EPIC proves that it is possible to create learning that combines rigor and sensitivity, technique and sense. But its permanence will depend on universities collectively assuming this responsibility, incorporating the link to the environment as part of their educational core rather than a peripheral extension.

"The university must continue its commitment to achieve alliances with public entities, international cooperation agencies, and civil society organizations for the realization of this type of project. Securing resources through external sources and calls is essential to achieving greater and better results."

— *María Rivero, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

Now, while institutionalization means giving structure to what deserves continuity, it can also entail a risk: that formality extinguishes the original impulse. The students know this and say it between the lines. For this reason, the most valuable proposals not only address financing but also legitimacy. That learning in the territory, interaction with communities, and the collaborative production of knowledge be recognized as legitimate, assessable, and transferable academic practices. Institutionalizing without losing the EPIC spirit implies finding a balance between structure and flexibility, between permanence and creativity.

"Cooperation, as far as young people go, with the support of various entities, shows that we can lead impact projects."

— *Florangel Camargo, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*

What was previously a one-off project has become a comprehensive training practice, in which each career assumes its role in building the university-society link. To this end, universities are required to strengthen their policies for linking with the environment and to articulate networks among faculties, institutes, and public actors. It is not a matter of "adding activities", but of integrating missions. That teaching, research, and extension dialogue is continuous and without hierarchies, producing collective learning that transcends institutional walls.

When an experience ceases to depend on a cycle or a person and becomes part of a shared university culture, that is the most profound form of sustainability.

Towards an Education with Meaning

Thinking about sustainability inevitably leads us to a bigger question: for what and for whom do we want the university to be sustained? The answer is not only in the diagnoses or in the indicators, but in the meaning, we attribute to education.



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The university was not born only to produce results, but to sustain a desire: the desire to know. That impulse that runs through human history and that, more than a necessity, is a form of hope. In its origins, the university was a community of teachers and apprentices, a space for dialogue in which the search for truth was inseparable from moral and civic formation. Today, in a society traversed by speed, specialization, and technification, recovering that spirit is not a romantic gesture, but an urgency.

The contemporary university, if it wants to remain relevant, must recognize itself as a community of meaning. Not a factory of skills or a showcase of achievements, but a place where knowledge is built with consciousness, where one learns to think without giving up feeling. This dimension does not compete with innovation or scientific development; it guides them and gives them purpose. Science without ethical direction becomes calculation, technique without a reflexive gaze, in a simple tool.

University sustainability is not measured only by external indicators, but also by its ability to keep alive the purpose of ensuring that each student, each teacher, and each community linked to it recognizes in the university a space for personal and collective growth, thought, and service.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

In Latin America and the Caribbean, this question of meaning cannot be separated from history. Since their origins, LAC universities have been intertwined with the processes of emancipation, social justice, and democratic construction. They have been hotbeds of critical thinking, engines of social mobility, and spaces where public policies, scientific cultures, and social movements have been developed. In this part of the world, education has always been a way of responding to collective urgencies.

The EPIC experiences are inscribed in this tradition and revive it by recovering the public function of higher education as a practice of dialogue, justice, and commitment to the territory. Amid structural inequalities, political crises, and environmental challenges, the university is once again called upon to think about itself, to review its methods and its purpose. In the words of one student, this reflection does not remain in the abstract, but translates into concrete action:

"To give a human perspective to the theoretical knowledge that was taught to me in the classrooms. To go beyond the norms that enshrine rights to contribute to their materialization. To contribute to the visibility and awareness of the processes from the academic and community spheres. To help overcome stigmas and stereotypes about the migrant population. I could not remain undaunted by the reality that thousands of migrants lived in the streets of my city."

— *María Rivero, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

Her testimony condenses what many students experienced: the transition from theory to commitment. Education, when rooted in social reality, becomes a practice of responsibility and empathy.

"The experience was enriching in academic and professional terms; Working with grassroots organizations allowed me to understand community empowerment as an ethical and collective task."

— *María Valencia, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

Both voices reveal how the university experience can be transformed into a process of public awareness and professional ethics. It is not just about learning a discipline but about understanding its relevance to others; to discover that knowledge acquires meaning when it is shared and put at the service of the common welfare.

What is at stake is not only academic relevance, but the human relevance of what we teach and learn. We call "higher education" to what is taught in universities, but its value does not lie in the hierarchy of the term itself. The *higher* should name the height of its purposes, such as the ability to uplift the people and communities with whom it works, to inspire, to connect, to transform.

Because each student who returns to a community, each teacher who reformulates their class based on what they have experienced, and each university that decides to accompany rather than observe widens the limits of what is possible.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

Reflections for a Shared Future

Looking Forward: Desires for Continuity

At the end of the projects, most students agreed on one thing: they would like to do it again. Beyond academic demands or hours in the field, in his words, there is a genuine desire for continuity, to remain in spaces where knowledge retains its link with life and its social meaning.

"I would definitely like to participate in similar projects, as they represent an opportunity to continue learning and contribute to my environment."

— *María Chacón, Universidad de Chile.*

For many, the project's closure was not an endpoint but a transition. The EPIC-N experiences awakened vocations, redefined trajectories, and reaffirmed commitments. What began as a learning exercise became a practice of meaning: knowledge ceased to be a means to prove and became a way of belonging, of influencing, of building community.

"I want to continue close to community work in peace; I dream of opening a podcast where the community can tell their stories."

— *Diana Sarmiento, Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga.*

In Diana's desire for continuity, something deeper can be guessed: the need to remain in dialogue, to continue weaving networks that connect the academic with the social. The EPIC Model projects, by linking knowledge to reality, awaken a vocation that does not fade at the end of the semester but persists as an ethical and professional horizon.

Tips for Those Who Come

When EPIC students look to the future, their advice does not sound like formulas, but like vital learning. They invite their peers' participation and recommend attitudes rather than methods be open to encounter, sustain curiosity, cultivate humility, and persevere even in uncertainty. What they recommend:

"That they are aware that they are contributing to a valuable objective, that they know that things do not always take the path initially proposed, and that they are not afraid to ask all the necessary questions."

— José Remigio, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.

"I advise them to get involved without hesitation. These experiences offer invaluable personal and professional growth and allow us to generate a positive impact on society (...) I would recommend that they enjoy the process; Projects can be sometimes complex to start and people can be hard to find to participate, but in the end, it is worth all the effort when you see the final results."

— Nicolás Ayara, Universidad de Chile.



Photo credits: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga

The student's words condense a pedagogy of commitment, learning by doing, asking questions without fear, getting involved without certainties, and sustaining processes with others. These are tips that combine prudence and enthusiasm; they are practical wisdom born of the experience of those who have already navigated the complexity of practice and found meaning in it, which neither idealizes social action nor overlooks its formative power.

"The significant moment is the end of the semester, where each report of the cases carried out during the semester is presented. It is gratifying to visualize the case, the balance of the learning process, and the presentation of the final product that is reached with the case."

— *Shirley Bautista, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.*



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In each testimony, one perceives a calm gratitude, an awareness of the value of having lived the complete experience: the diagnosis, the doubt, the encounter, the surrender. What remains of each experience is not a product, but a disposition.

The willingness to listen, to work with others, to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge. Those who went through these projects not only learned to think better, but also to live together better.

"It was a transformative experience that allowed me to grow as a person and professional, leaving a significant mark on my training."

— *Nicolás Ayara, Universidad de Chile.*

These voices reveal that the most lasting learning is not in the results, but in the values activated: trust, justice, solidarity, and hope. Thus, each student, when saying goodbye to the project, leaves something more than a report or a product: a seed of co-responsibility. Because what EPIC teaches, deep down, is that all authentic transformation begins with the ability to look with others, to put knowledge at the service of the common, and to sustain enthusiasm even in uncertainty.

Perhaps that is why, when they talk about the future, no one says "I finished", but "I want to continue". Continue to participate, learn, and share. Continue to believe that the university can be a place where knowledge becomes dialogue and dialogue becomes transformative action. That is the true legacy of these experiences: having discovered that learning is also an act of hope and that each collaboration, no matter how small, opens the possibility of a fairer, more empathetic, and more humane world.

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