Virtual exchange in Latin America: a profile of faculty and staff participants

Carmen King Ramírez[1]

Abstract

Latin American educational institutions report some of the lowest internationalization rates in the world (OECD, 2019). Historically, recognized barriers to internationalization have included programs based largely on student mobility as well as a lack of systematic implementation and funding (De Wit, Gacel-Ávila, & Knobel, 2017). In order to increase student and faculty access to international education experiences, Latin American universities are working to offer more inclusive, cost-effective methods of curricular diversification via Virtual Exchange (VE) (Lafont Castillo, Echeverría King, & Álvarez Ruíz, 2021). Given the limited publications currently available regarding VE in this region, this article seeks to establish a profile of Latin American faculty and staff who are presently engaged in VE initiatives as well as identify resources they need to ensure that VE programs are sustainable at their home institutions. The data presented in this article resulted from a mix-methods survey carried out among the Latin American Collaborative Online International Learning (LatAm COIL) network membership. These data provide important insights to the current trends and future possibilities for VE programs in this region.

Keywords: internationalization; Latin America; virtual exchange; COIL; online education.

1. University of Arizona, USA; carmenking@email.arizona.edu; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8857-142X

1.   Introduction

The internationalization of higher education plays a vital role in preparing students for successful integration into the sociocultural and economic landscapes of the 21st century. While scholars agree on the many benefits of international programming (Deardorff, 2006; O'Dowd, 2018), the approaches to and definitions of academic internationalization are diverse and ever evolving. In a commonly cited publication, Knight (2003) described internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 2). Subsequently, Hudzik (2011) added that internationalization requires a commitment to incorporating international and comparative perspectives throughout all realms (e.g. teaching, research, service) of higher education. In a comprehensive review of internationalization models found in higher education, Brandenburg and de Wit (2012) underline that, despite differences in terminologies, 21st century concepts of internationalization hinge on engagement and meaning making that are integrated into the heart of curriculum development and delivery.

Through a review of leading publications regarding the internationalization in higher education, one clearly observes that such discussions are disproportionately dominated by North American and European perspectives. Meanwhile, developing countries from the Global South, namely Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, are relegated to the periphery as their participation in academic internationalization has been largely based on sending students to foreign institutions and hosting satellite campuses belonging to English dominant universities of the Global North (De Wit, 2014). Inevitably, discrepancies in the conceptualization and implementation of international education between the Global North vs. South are closely tied to each region's economic and social structures as well as accessibility to academic resources (Camacho Lizárraga, 2017; Gacel-Avila, 2018).

In an effort to shed more light on Latin American[2] institutions' processes of internationalization, this article provides a profile of the LatAm COIL network membership and the resources they need to successfully implement international exchange programs in their institutions.

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2. For the purposes of this article, Latin America encompasses Mexico in North America as well as the countries of Central America and South America. The Spanish-speaking Caribbean Isles of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are also considered part of Latin America.

2. Literature review

2.1. Internationalization in Latin America

Many Latin American universities have long-running, successful international programs based on sending students abroad as well as hosting international students at their local campuses; such programs can be found at internationally ranked institutions such as Universidad de Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Universidade de São Paulo (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2022). Moreover, Latin American institutions have recently been applauded for securing more global partnerships, increasing international student and faculty recruitment, and prioritizing interregional study abroad opportunities with other Latin American countries (ICEF Monitor, 2022). While these efforts have not gone unnoticed, Latin America still has some of the lowest international student exchange rates in the world trailing behind North America and Africa (OECD, 2019). The region is also one of the lowest in terms of foreign students received for study abroad purposes (NAFSA, 2021; Statista, 2022; UNESCO, 2019). In an effort to explain these trends of low student participation, Gacel-Avila (2007, 2018) has identified barriers such as a lack foreign language proficiency, little funding, and unsustainable internationalization strategies at institutional, state, and regional levels.

The student disenfranchisement posed by mobility-based international programs has given Latin American educators cause to seek more inclusive, cost-effective methods of curricular diversification through *Internationalization at Home* (IaH) initiatives (Lafont Castillo et al., 2021). As denoted by the name, IaH allows students to participate in international exchanges without leaving home. When carried out successfully, IaH programs strengthen connections between global and domestic cultures, encourage intercultural collaborations, increase students' global international and intercultural competencies, transform pedagogical practices, and enrich participating institutions' intellectual cultures (Ruíz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014; Soria & Troisi, 2014).

Approaches to IaH may include the incorporation of intercultural themes in course curricula, exposure to international perspectives, and VE programs (Beelen & Jones, 2018). The latter strategy (VE programs) has steadily gained popularity during the past two decades as an alternative to study abroad (Guth, 2019; O'Dowd, 2018). Advantages of this method include the possibility of international exchange for individuals who cannot travel abroad due to professional, personal, and/or economic obligations. VE also implies a lesser financial commitment (as compared to in-person exchange), and the flexibility to adapt program timelines and course contents to fit the needs of specific institutions. In an effort to provide more information about developing countries' interest and participation in VE projects, the current article outlines the genesis of the *Red*

Latinoamericana de COIL (known as the LatAm COIL network in English) and the profiles of its membership.

2.2.   VE in Latin America

VE has been defined as "sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators" (Evolve, 2021, n.p.). The objectives of this pedagogical model frequently include language acquisition, content-based academic exchanges, intercultural learning, and the development of global citizenship skills (Guth, 2019; O'Dowd, 2018).

While there is a respectable body of research regarding VE programs carried out by European and US institutions of higher education (Helm, 2019; Jager et al., 2019; Rubin, 2016), there are limited publications regarding VE in Latin America (Acosta & Correa, 2017; Castillo, King, & Ruíz, 2021; Knipp Silva & Bozhidar Scarlota, 2021; King Ramírez, 2020, 2021). Some scholars have posited that the lack of research on VE and other internationalization initiatives in this region are due to the large number of professors who may not be trained in academic research and/or are not required to actively carry out academic investigations (De Wit et al., 2005).

While VE can be a practical alternative to study abroad, this type of academic programming presents many of the same challenges as online learning. Therefore, certain sociocultural and technological conditions must be in place for the successful implementation of this model. In regards to Latin America, researchers have found the following deterrents to the implementation of VE programs: limited technological infrastructure, a lack of reliable internet access, and faculty who are unaccustomed to implementing technology-based learning modules in their courses as factors that can deter the implementation of VE in Latin American universities (Cavalari & Aranha, 2019; King Ramírez, 2020). There is also evidence that VE initiatives may be tempered by professors' slow adaptation to student-directed pedagogies and collaborative, project-based learning scenarios (Humberto, 2016; King Ramírez, Lafford, & Wermers, 2021; Parra de Marroquín, 2008). In fact, it has been argued that Latin American institutions' failure to systematically adapt to and support online learning modalities (such as those required for successful VE ventures) was a major factor in the staggering student dissertation rates that this region experienced during the COVID pandemic (Eyzaguirre, Le Foulon, & Salvatierra, 2020; INEGI, 2020; Ortega, 2021).

In order to better prepare faculty and staff to implement VE programs at their home institutions, the LatAm COIL (2020) network was created to serve as the first organization that specifically caters to

Latin American educators. The following section details the genesis of this organization as well as its role in providing strategic internationalization options for Latin America and the Caribbean.

2.3.   The COIL LatAm network

VE initiatives are known by several names and approaches among which COIL is recognized (O'Dowd, 2018). The COIL model entails pairing two or more faculty from different countries to reach a shared academic goal. Rubin and Guth (2015) explain that the collaborative aspect of this model is unique in that professors and students are required to contribute contents, receive feedback, and re-envision their initial perspectives in a way that creates a synthesis and recombination of ideas.

While there are other organizations that promote VE initiatives within specific regions of Latin America[3], the LatAm COIL network is the first to serve the entirety of Latin America and the Caribbean. The LatAm COIL network resulted from a series of conversations between Latin American administrators and Dr John Rubin, founder of the SUNY COIL model. In 2020, Dr Rubin led an intensive VE workshop in Veracruz, Mexico with academics from Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico; Universidad de Monterrey, Mexico; Universidade Estadual Paulista, Brazil; and Instituto Tecnológico Metropolitano de Medellín, Colombia (V. Rodríguez Luna, personal communication, April 6, 2022). Upon concluding this training, the participants created the LatAm COIL network whose objectives are the following: (1) facilitating communication between COIL practitioners and institutions in Latin America, (2) promoting COIL research and practice, and (3) expanding curricular internationalization strategies through VE networks and online collaborative learning in Latin American institutions of higher education (Red Latinoamericana COIL, 2020).

Dr Rodríguez Luna, president of the LatAm COIL Network, explained that the dismal international student mobility rates in Latin America led the organization to prioritize professional development opportunities for their membership rather than needs analysis and other research-related activities.

> "An analysis was not done because data results like those from IESALC (2019) confirm that only 1% of students in Latin America have mobility opportunities. Furthermore, those of us who founded the network are very familiar with this situation because the majority of our students cannot have in-person mobility and it is necessary to carry out IaH projects like

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3. Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC) Virtual International Partnerships (VIP) Program forms faculty partnerships among CONAHEC member institutions who collaborate in the design and teaching of part of or a complete course using internet and telecommunications technologies. https://elnet.org/CONAHEC-VIP/. Aulas Interconectadas is an international VE initiative based at Universidad Palermo, Colombia. https://www.palermo.edu/arquitectura/2020/agosto/aulas-interconectadas.html

implementing COIL international VE" (Translation, V. Rodríguez Luna, personal interview, April 6, 2022).

During its first year, the network hosted a series of webinars and online trainings aimed to help members understand how to conceive, develop, and implement VE projects. In 2021, the organization hosted its first international virtual conference with renowned VE experts such as Robert O'Dowd. Presently, the network hosts an annual conference that allots a space for regional and international practitioners to showcase VE projects and research.

While the network draws on digital learning methods championed by US and European scholars, it differs on several fronts. First, the professional development activities aim to offer sessions in both Spanish and English; therefore, monolingual participants can choose sessions led in their preferred language. This was observed in the 2022 LatAm COIL conference during which simultaneous interpreting (English-Spanish, Spanish-English) was provided for all presentations. Second, the network encourages professional development activities and academic partnerships led by Latin American educators. Third, the organization sponsors virtual conferences where novice and seasoned professionals may present learning models that meet the unique needs of Latin American students. Lastly, the digitally based format of the network activities makes it a more appropriate internationalization tool for students and professors who have historically experienced staggeringly low mobility rates.

The LatAm COIL network's scope and reach makes it an ideal organization from which to study internationalization efforts, specifically VE, in Latin America. Therefore, the author systematically collected data from the network's membership in order to answer the following research questions.

- What are LatAm COIL members' academic and professional backgrounds?
- What does the membership hope to gain from participating in this VE network?
- What are Latin American educators' preferences for VE projects?
- What types of professional development opportunities do Latin American educators need to successfully carry out VE programs?

3. Methodology

This following study was carried out among members of the LatAm COIL network membership between 2020-2021. The author implemented a mixed-methods research approach via an international online survey containing open-ended and multiple choice questions.

3.1. Participants

At the time of this research (Spring 2021), the LatAm COIL network had 200 individual members[4], 152 were from 11 different Latin American countries. Following participation in a six-week VE training offered by the LatAm COIL network in fall 2020, permission was obtained from the board members to contact the Network's membership. The LatAm COIL network Board shared the anonymous survey link with its members on the network's email listserv. 60 members from ten different Latin American countries participated in the survey. A total of 47 different Latin American universities are represented in this study providing a rich context of academic practices and cultures. Figure 1 provides a comparison of organizational membership and the number of survey respondents.

Figure 1.   Network membership versus survey participants
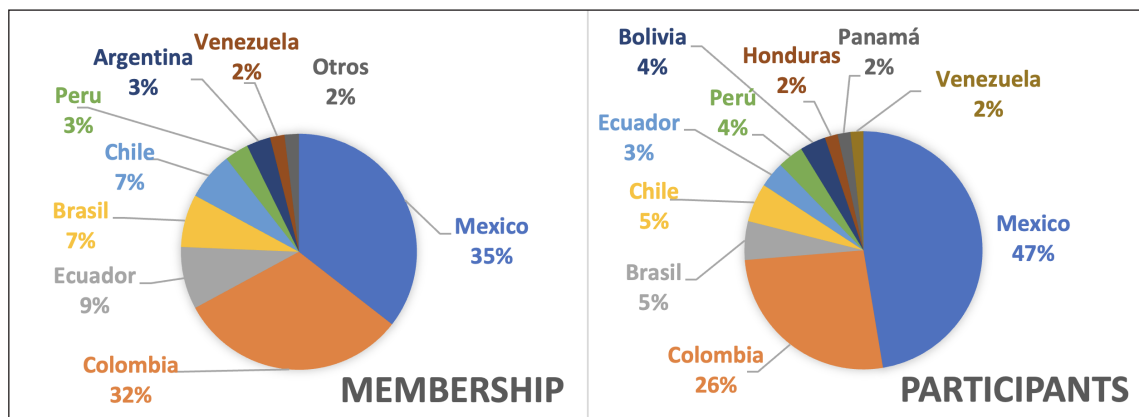
Figure 1 illustrates participants were from 91% of the countries represented in the network membership. However, it should be noted that Mexico and Colombia had the majority of survey participants (62%) while countries such as Honduras, Panamá, and Costa Rica had only one participant each. The least represented regions were Central America and the Caribbean. There were no participants from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Belice, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

3.2. Data collection methods

Data were collected from March-June 2021 using an online survey in Spanish, the most widely spoken language in Latin America, which included 19 multiple choice and 11 open-ended questions which

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4. Members outside of Latin America= 48: United States (35), Canada (6), Netherlands (4), Belgium (1); Spain (1); South Africa (1).

were designed in line with the research questions. The survey included a section related to the participants' experiences with VE and online education. These questions were designed to establish an understanding of how the participants' experiences may have shaped their knowledge, needs, and perspectives. The survey was created in a way to ensure validity, how well the survey questions elicit information related to the field of study, and reliability, the possibility that the survey could be successfully repeated among similar audiences (Taherdoost, 2016). Before its dissemination, the survey was reviewed and approved by the COIL LatAm board of VE experts to determine both its validity and reliability. Based on feedback, the author incorporated recommendations regarding the survey language and design. Afterward, the survey was sent to the author's institutional review board who found it to be in accordance with ethical human subject data collection. The survey questions can be found in Appendix 1.

The survey was designed and implemented in the Spanish language, the most dominant language in Latin America, to ensure it was accessible and valid for participants. For the purposes of this publication, the author back-translated the participants' responses into English. This translation process served as validity evidence for construct equivalence (Hawkins, Cheng, Elsworth, & Osborne, 2020).

3.3.   Data analysis methods

To identify data patterns in relation to participants' experiences and perspectives with internationalization education and VE, a thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015) was implemented in the results section of this article. Data were analyzed and grouped into the following thematic categories:

- Experience with International Exchange;
- Experience with VE;
- Membership Motives;
- VE Preferences; and
- Desired Membership Benefits.

Within each thematic unit, corresponding quantitative responses are illustrated by tables and figures whose titles are accompanied by the number of respondents in parenthesis. Quantitative data is complimented by participants' qualitative responses. In the results section, the author included opened-ended responses that best represented high frequency themes.

4. Results

4.1. LatAm COIL members' academic and professional backgrounds

The first research question addressed in this research aimed to identify the LatAm COIL network members' academic and professional backgrounds. In this section, members' age, positions, and academic fields are reported on, followed by their experience with international exchange, and their experience with VE.

4.1.1. LatAm COIL members' age, position, and academic field

Table 1 provides an overview of the survey participants' most represented age group, their professional positions, and a breakdown of the academic fields in which the participants work.

Table 1.   LatAm COIL network members' age, position, and academic fields (N=60)

	Categories	N	%
Participants' Age Range	21-29	3	5%
	30-39 years	14	23%
	40-49 years	23	38%
	50-59 years	14	23%
	60+	6	10%
Position/Title	Administrator	30	50%
	Professor/instructor	19	32%
	International Coordinator	11	18%
Academic Field	Humanities	23	39%
	Business	10	17%
	Technology	6	10%
	Healthcare	6	10%
	International Education	5	8%
	Sciences	5	8%
	Other	5	8%

The majority of participants were 40-49 years of age (38%) and held administrative positions (50%) at their university. The most represented areas of academic expertise were humanities (39%), business (17%), technology (10%), and health care (10%).

4.1.2.   Experience with international exchange

In regards to participants' experience with international exchange, the majority of the participants (44/73%) had completed an on-site (face-to-face) exchange program as a student or instructor. As observed in Figure 2, study abroad destinations were concentrated in European countries followed by English-speaking countries such as Canada and the United States. Only two participants reported international experiences in developing regions of the world (Asia and Latin America).

While Europe was by far the most favored destination, there was not a clear predilection for a specific country. Those mentioned included Germany, Holland, Scotland, Sweden, Greece, Finland, and Spain.

Aside from the destination country, survey participants also provided details as to their life stage (student or professional) when they participated in an international exchange. Figure 3 illustrates that over half of the individuals engaged in international exchange during their undergraduate or graduate studies, while a lesser number did not engage in international exchange until they became working professionals.

Many of those who participated in exchange programs as students mentioned their affiliated organizations (e.g. *El Programa Delfin, PILA*, and *AFS*[5]*)*. Insights were also provided as to why the participants chose to complete an academic exchange during that particular stage in life. A female participant from Ecuador (Participant 4) commented that through an academic scholarship in agronomic engineering she was able to study in Honduras at an international university and successfully complete her degree. A participant from Chile completed an internship in Holland "because, without a doubt, the experience outside of Chile would make an important difference in my resume and because I was interested in learning about other ways of work and life" (Translation, Participant 11). Another individual traveled to Madrid to complete postgraduate studies, "as a doctoral student at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in order to complete my dissertation" (Translation, Participant 30). According to this data, the survey participants were attracted to international exchange as students who sought to increase their marketability in academic and professional contexts. Furthermore, those who studied abroad cited personal gains such as multicultural exposure and research opportunities.

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5. El Programa Delfin is an exchange program that was created by the Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit, México (https://programadelfin.org.mx/). PILA (Programa de intercambio académico latinoamericano) was created by higher education associations in Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia (https://www.programapila.lat/presentacion/). AFS is an international, non-profit organization dedicated to providing intercultural learning opportunities abroad (https://www.afs.org.mx/).

Figure 2.   International exchange destinations

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE DESTINATIONS

- Asia 5%
- Latin America 5%
- Australia 5%
- United States 15%
- Europe 50%
- Canada 20%
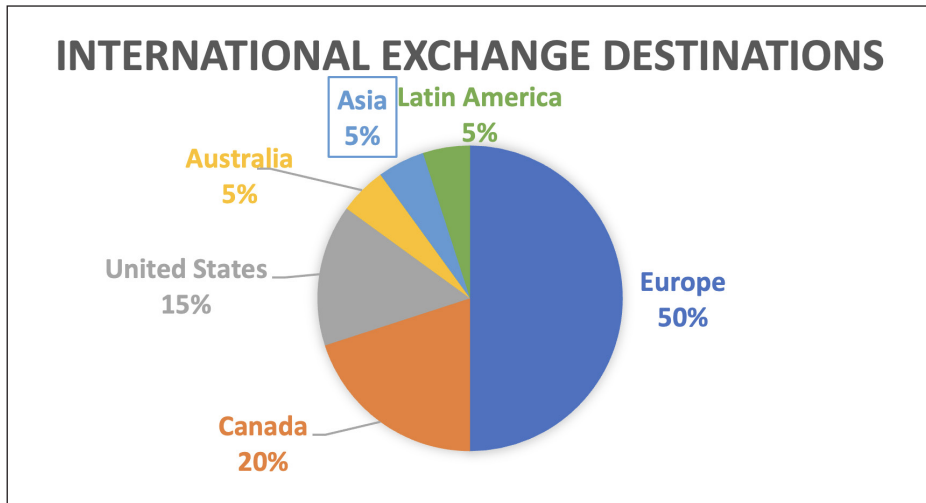
Figure 3.   Life stage during international exchange experience

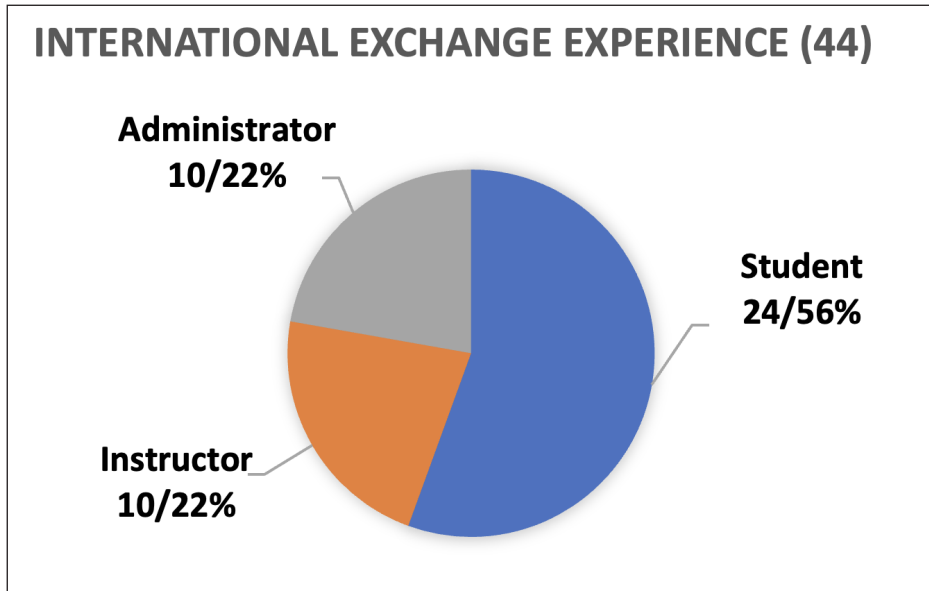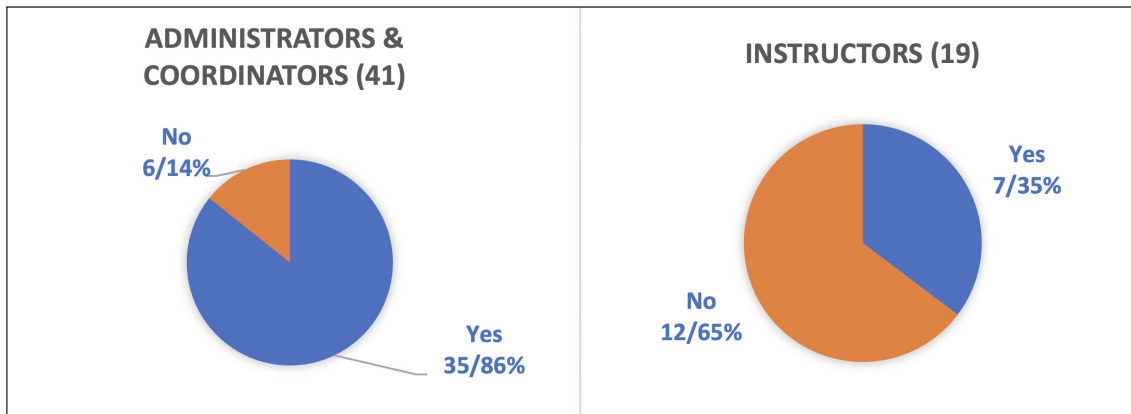**INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE EXPERIENCE (44)**

- Administrator 10/22%
- Student 24/56%
- Instructor 10/22%

Figure 4 compares administrator and program coordinators' previous international experiences (left side) with instructors' international experiences (right side).

Figure 4.   Administrators/coordinators versus instructors with international experience

Survey participants who held administrative positions not only out-numbered instructor participants but also had more personal experience with international exchange. Whereas 35/86% of administrators/coordinators had previously participated in international exchange programs, only 7/35% of instructors had international experience. As illustrated by the following excerpt, several administrators confirmed that their experiences abroad were pivotal in determining their career paths.

> "I studied a year of my degree program at a university in Finland. That exchange offered me very enjoyable experiences and a great multicultural education. From there, I continued my personal and professional career in internationalization. As an administrator, I have participated in two international exchange programs" (Translation, Participant 22).

The data presented here points to stark differences between university administrators' international exposure as compared to faculty members.

4.1.3.   LatAm COIL members' experience with VE

Given that VE programs are carried out in a virtual environment and as such rely on a variety of technologies and tools that are implemented in online education, the survey sought to create a profile regarding memberships' experience with online teaching. Figure 5 demonstrates the network members' most common teaching modality[6].

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6. Since this survey was administered during the COVID Pandemic, during which most faculty were forced to move to a virtual teaching environment without previous training, this question solicited the membership's most common teaching modality before the pandemic.

Figure 5. Teaching modality
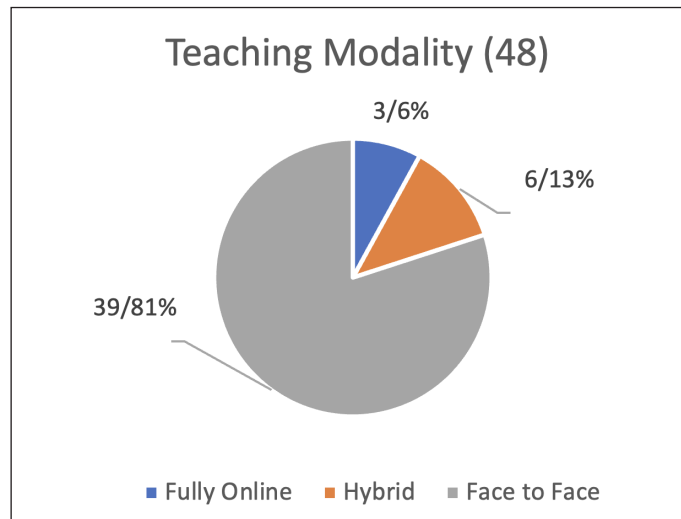
Survey results confirmed that 81% of participants taught face-to-face courses. Only 18% of those surveyed taught courses that required an online teaching component – of those the majority (13%) were hybrid courses with only 6% taught fully online.

When asked if their institution currently offered VE programs, 43/72% responded affirmatively. VE programs affiliated with some participants' universities include *El Programa de Intercambio y Movilidad Académica* (PIMA), promoted by the Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos, and *Aulas Interconectadas*, an international VE initiative based out of the Universidad Palermo, Colombia.

There are also professors who have participated in VE activities through exclusive associations such as *Red de Universidades del Regnum Christi* (Participant 10) which is composed of 14 partner universities. Other VE initiatives include academic collaborations established by foreign embassies, such as the American Embassy (Participant 18). While several different VE initiatives were mentioned in the survey responses, no data was provided regarding the length of the exchanges nor participant profiles.

Other survey comments signaled VE programs driven by faculty who are participating in the COIL LatAm network for personal interests; "[t]here are three of us, professors, that are participating in COIL this semester" (Translation, Participant 32). However, it is unclear if these professors are supported and recognized by their institution for their participation in VE activities.

4.2.   Membership motives

The second research question explored what COIL LatAm network members hoped to gain from participating in this VE network. Figure 6 illustrates the most common membership motives.

Figure 6.   Membership motives
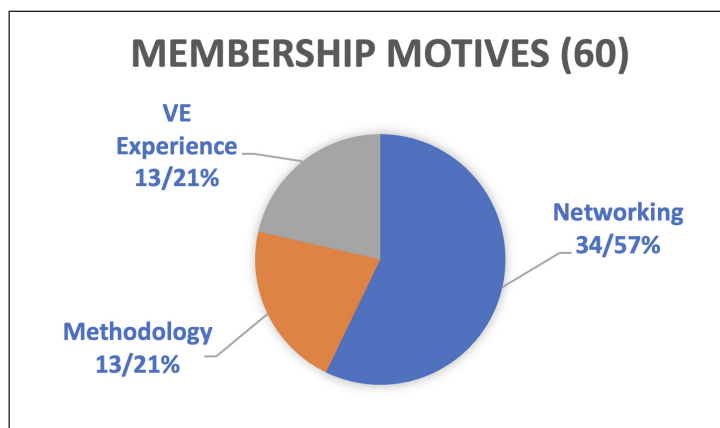
The following subsections provide an explanation of the data represented above.

4.2.1.   Networking

The majority (34/57%) of participants sought COIL LatAm membership to secure networking opportunities with international colleagues. Undoubtedly, said networking opportunities were focused on securing an international partner with whom to carry out VE projects. Figure 7 below illustrates the number of participants who were seeking a VE partnership.

The majority of the network members (43/71%) were still trying to secure international partners. A much smaller percentage was not yet sure of needing a partner (9/15%) or were not actively seeking a partner (8/14%).

Also related to securing a VE partner, the membership expected the LatAm COIL network to provide a comprehensive, user-friendly system that pairs partners within specific parameters (e.g. course topic, target language, project duration).

"A more effective communication path to find partners" (Translation, Participant 11).

"A complete and up-to-date directory of institutional partners and continual training about COIL methodologies" (Translation, Participant 50).

Several members expressed the expectation that the aforementioned resources do not require a subscription fee but be incorporated into "a free space to share experiences within the region and to find partners for [their] professors" (Translation, Participant 27).

Figure 7.   Need for VE partner
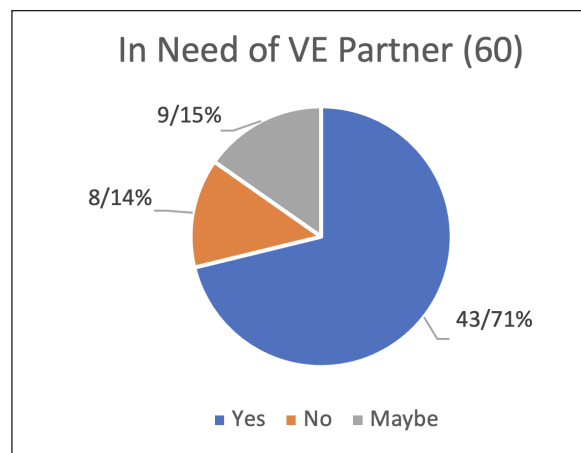
4.2.2.   Methodologies for VE

A lesser percentage of participants (13/21%) joined the COIL LatAm network to learn about VE methodologies. The open-end responses revealed that some participants sought methodology training to comply with administrative directives set out by their universities.

> "[I became a network member because of] interest in receiving training about the topic and to be able to support this type of initiative at the university where I work" (Translation, Participant 50).

There were also those who wished to leverage VE methodologies to engage students, expose them to diverse cultural perspectives, and encourage travel abroad.

> "[I became a network member] to incentivize students to travel outside of the country, to study other languages, and to carry out graduate students abroad" (Translation, Participant 18).

> "[I became a network member] to expand the outcomes of the course and the knowledge that students can obtain. Also, to increase the possibility of collaboration between different disciplines and different countries with similar problems while valuing the knowledge and local resources" (Participant 23, Translation).

International research opportunities also played a role in motivating membership to learn VE methodologies. Example comments were as follows:

> "Contributions to research, group teaching, and research development" (Translation, Participant 28).

> "To obtain an updated flexible [course] component, a research project or a social projection project between both institutions" (Translation, Participant 7).

4.2.3. *Participation in VE projects*

The last 21% of membership joined the COIL LatAm network due to past or current participation in VE initiatives.

> "We are also part of the SUNY COIL Network, but we believe it is important to strengthen connections in the region" (Translation, Participant 22).

> "Because I am one of the first professors that has participated in COIL at the UV" (Translation, Participant 11).

This portion of membership sought to achieve alignment between "the network objectives" and their "university's strategic internationalization objectives" (Translation, Participant 6).

4.3. Preferences for VE projects

This section sheds light on questions and concerns that Latin American educators have regarding VE projects. Figures 6-9 illustrate participants' preferences for VE projects in relation to planning, partnerships, and content.

Figure 8 provides a breakdown of survey responses regarding the language in which participants desire to carry out their VE program.

Figure 8. VE language

VE LANGUAGE (48)

■ Bilingual ■ Spanish ■ English ■ Portuguese

4/8%
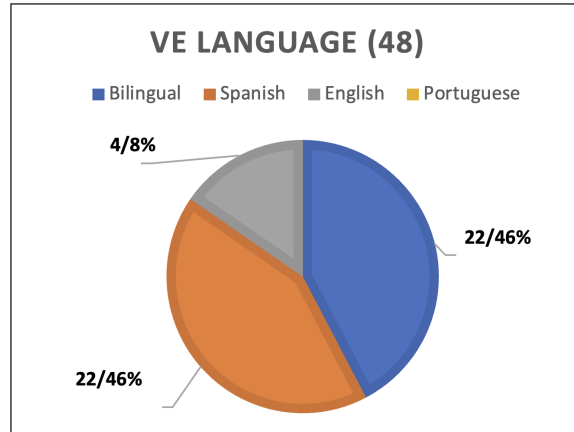
22/46%

22/46%

Perhaps the most salient finding is that Latin American educators prefer to engage in VE projects that are carried out in a bilingual format, a combination of Spanish/English (22/46%), or solely in Spanish (22/46%). In this regard, 92% of participants desired that Spanish be used in their VE projects. A minority of members (4/8%) preferred that English be used as the primary language.

Figure 9 represents participants' preferences for academic partnerships; 46% of participants preferred VE partners from a similar academic field, 42% did not have a specific preference, while only 12% expressed a desire to work with a partner from another academic area.
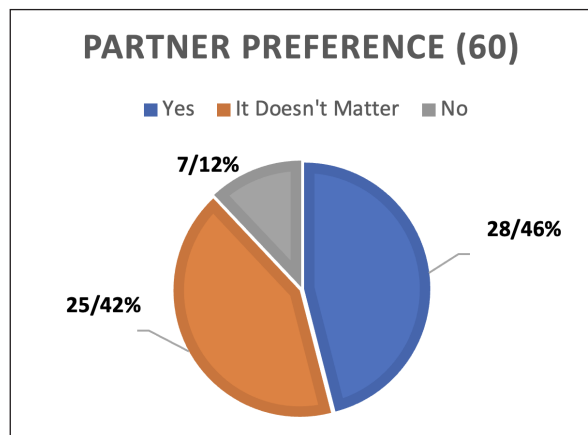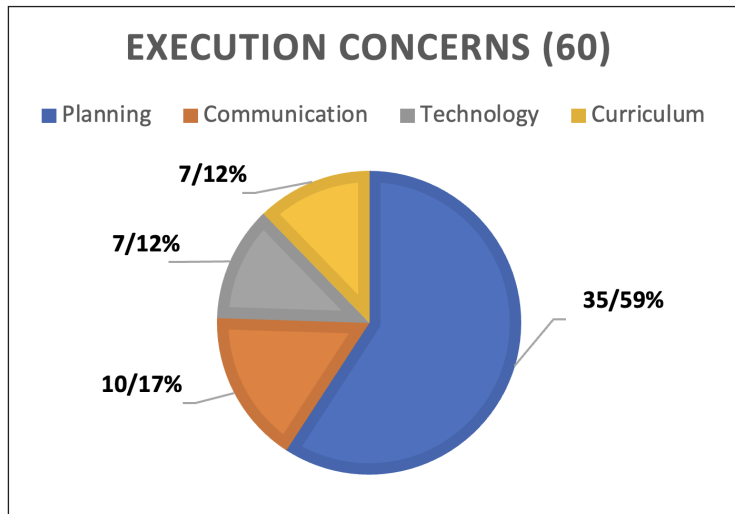
Figure 9. Academic partner preference

PARTNER PREFERENCE (60)

■ Yes ■ It Doesn't Matter ■ No

7/12%

28/46%

25/42%

Figure 10 illustrates participants' biggest concern about setting up VE activities with an international partner.

Figure 10. Program execution concerns


EXECUTION CONCERNS (60)

■ Planning ■ Communication ■ Technology ■ Curriculum

7/12%

7/12%

35/59%

10/17%

The majority of participants (35/59%) expressed concerns with the planning stage of VE projects (finding a partner, determining a mutual topic, recruitment, etc.). The ability to communicate with international partners (language chosen for activities and contact with colleagues) was a much lesser cited preoccupation (10/17%), followed by a low number of participants who were concerned with the use of technology (7/12%, executing the course via apps and online platforms), and curriculum design (7/12%, creating mutually beneficial course objectives, rubrics, etc.).

Figure 11 shows the survey participants' responses in relation to the desired length of a VE collaboration.

Almost half (28/47%) of the participants desired a four to six week project commitment. This group was followed by the preference for two to three week exchanges (15/25%). The least attractive VE commitment (5/9%) corresponded to projects that last an entire academic semester (15 weeks).

Figure 11. Program duration preference
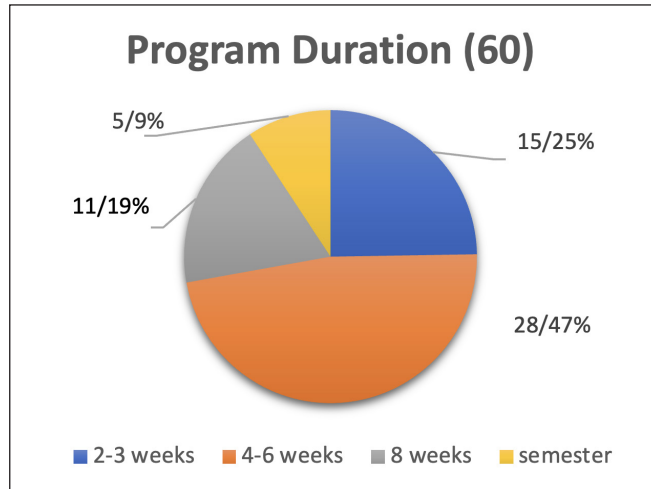
4.3.1. Professional development opportunities

In the vein of professional development opportunities, research participants detailed the type of activities that they would like the network to offer. Many participants requested trainings related to the selection and design of online learning platforms from which VE programs can be managed.

> "Methods training, technology resources for the development of COIL, dialogue spaces for partners, participation certificates within the network spaces" (Translation, Participant 17).

> "Workshops about how to more effectively use technologies and virtual platforms" (Translation, Participant 24).

Also related to support with developing VE education opportunities was the interest in learning about strategies to promote VE initiatives within their home institutions. This included ideas for encouraging faculty participation, institutional recognition for innovative projects, and financial support.

> "Institutional proceedings to formalize the courses" (Translation, Participant 20).

> "Free trainings given that the institution does not have funding to finance course fees" (Translation, Participant 46).

Figure 12 illustrates the survey participants' plans to participate in future VE trainings. The majority (83%) of participants reported that they plan to attend a VE training in the future. However, 14% were unsure of future participation in VE workshops and 3% were not interested in VE trainings.
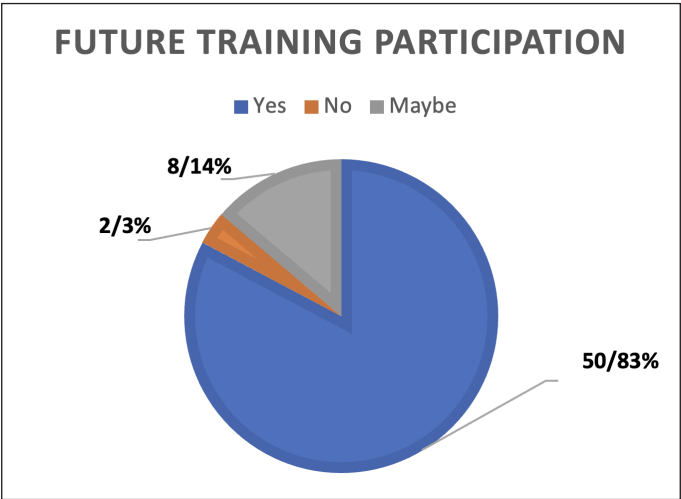
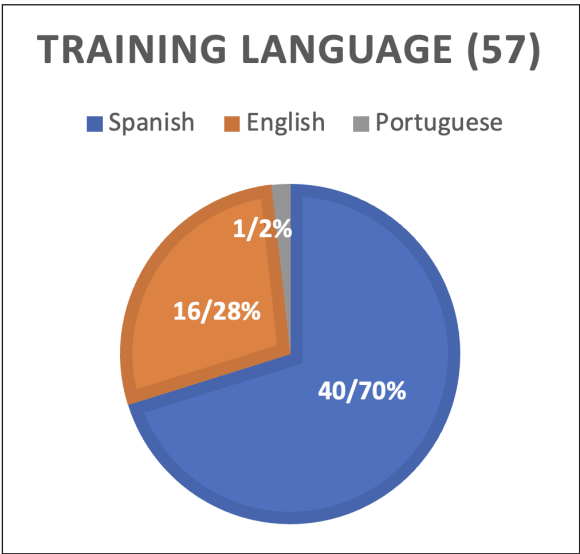**Figure 12. Future training participation**

FUTURE TRAINING PARTICIPATION

Yes No Maybe

8/14%
2/3%
50/83%

Figure 13. Language training preference

TRAINING LANGUAGE (57)

Spanish English Portuguese

1/2%
16/28%
40/70%

Figure 13 provides information regarding the language in which participants would like to receive future VE trainings; 70% of the participants preferred to complete professional development trainings in Spanish. It is probable that this preference corresponds to the fact that Spanish is the main language spoken in Latin American countries; while 28% of participants preferred training in English. It is possible that this preference was expressed by participants with more international experience. Only 2% of participants preferred the use of Portuguese for trainings; however, very few survey participants were from Brazil.

5.   Discussion

This article sought to determine a general profile for LatAm COIL network members, their experience with VE, and their desired outcomes for VE projects. Currently, the majority of members were administrators who had previous face-to-face international exchange experience. Almost all international experiences reported were in European and/or English-language countries. This trend of sending students to more developed Northern nations is indicative of Latin American institutions' positioning in the Global South, a geopolitical region that has historically been subject to the economic and cultural practices of European nations (Dados & Connell, 2012). International academic exchange practices based on sending students from South to North reinforces historic inequalities suffered by nations of the Global South as it assumes that the North's approaches to understanding and engaging with socio political and economic issues are transferable to the realities of the South (Humberto, 2016; Zeleza, 2012). In this way, Latin American institutions that favor administrators with international exchange experiences in the Global North are at risk of replicating the educational inequities wrought through centuries of European hegemony.

Repositioning internationalization efforts from a periphery to centralized academic activity requires the establishment of sustainable faculty-led models that take into account each institutions' unique realities as well as their students' needs (Rama, 2017; Stohl, 2007). The data gleaned from the LatAm COIL survey points to foreseeable barriers to creating sustainable VE projects. Namely, as seen in Table 1 and Figure 4 of the results, those with internationalization experiences as well as those who currently participate in promoting the COIL LatAm network largely hold administration positions as their institutions. This data could point to internationalization programs being carried out as top-down, administrative led initiatives which may present a disconnect between classroom practices and curricular innovation. However, the survey also points to challenges presented by the bottom-up (teacher-led) model given the general lack of faculty experience and expertise in online program development. While administration and faculty may be eager to replicate the positive personal experience they reported from their own international exchange experiences, those experiences

were in face-to-face environments. Therefore, the first challenge will be to find ways to create similar 'life changing' experiences via a VE model. In this way, the success of VE programs will be largely determined by the online design and delivery of VE curriculum.

Based on the current survey results, online teaching and learning is an area in which LatAm COIL membership had little training and experience. While this data is not indicative of participants' comfort with online teaching nor if they have received pedagogical training for virtual instruction, it does illustrate that online teaching environments are relatively new to the network membership. Furthermore, participants cited the need for professional development activities that address the use of online learning platforms and how technologies can be used to implement VE projects. This data seems to coincide with Latin American institutions' difficult transition to online learning platforms (Ortega, 2021). The lack of infrastructure and institutional support for online education could potentially pose a threat to the sustainability of VE initiatives which are dependent on student and faculty's knowledge of online learning environments as well as their willingness to implement virtual learning modules.

In section 4.1.3 of the results, 43/72% of network members confirmed that their institution was already implementing VE in course curricula. However, survey participants demonstrated little knowledge regarding the details of their institutions' existing VE initiatives. Furthermore, existing VE initiatives seemed to be concentrated among a small group of faculty/administrators. This data illustrates clear discrepancies between Latin American institutions' interest (and in some cases participation) in VE, and their ability to design and carry out VE programs. This finding supports previous studies that have pointed to the disconnect between administrative rhetoric and the ability to implement international programming at a curricular level (Gacel-Avila, 2018).

The disconnect between administrative goals for internationalization and faculty implementation may also be observed in the academic administrators who comprise the majority of COIL LatAm membership. The survey revealed that members primarily joined the organization for networking opportunities and not to acquire VE teaching methods. However, after having experience with the network, survey participants were not opposed to participating in future VE methodology trainings.

According to the survey results, the following aspects would make the professional development activities more attractive for the membership: (1) offer trainings in Spanish or Spanish/English; (2) focus on developing technology literacy and online teaching skills; (3) offer free registration; and (4) validate participation with official certifications that can be used for professional portfolios. Some of these petitions are indicative of administrative practices that are specific to Latin American institutions such as requiring faculty/staff to present official documents that validate participation

in academic and professional development activities. With this in mind, in order to incentivize faculty, VE activities must consider how participants will be recognized in a way that is meaningful for their home institutions.

Given that 71% of membership is actively seeking VE partners (see Figure 7), professional development opportunities may include networking activities as well as design workshops for VE projects. Training materials that are provided should support the membership's preference for short term collaborations (two to six weeks), as long-term VE projects present greater complications regarding academic scheduling, accreditation requirements, and course curriculum design (King Ramírez, 2020).

When asked what they hoped that their students would gain from participating in VE, respondents cited global citizenship, intercultural understanding, and professional networking (see Participation in VE). These high frequency terms are frequently associated with liberal arts educational models. Perhaps the preference for these learning outcomes was influenced by the fact that the majority of respondents were from humanities-based fields. The disproportionate participation of humanities-based professionals is not surprising given VE models' ties to language education as well as the historic importance of internationalization initiatives championed by humanities departments (O'Dowd, 2018). The respondents' openness to the aforementioned skills reflects positively on Latin American educators' awareness of intercultural competencies, which are heavily promoted by worldwide organizations such as UNESCO (2016). It is also encouraging to note that, the respondents did not view one's academic field a deterrent for establishing VE partnerships as less than half of the respondents expressed a preference for VE partners from similar academic backgrounds.

6.   Conclusions

The LatAm COIL network is working to respond to the need to provide accessible internationalization opportunities for faculty who live and work in Latin America. Based on the data reported in this article, several recommendations can be made for the future development of the LatAm COIL network. Data provided by the network participants illustrated disparities in their countries of origin. The majority of participants were from Mexico and Colombia which may indicate that VE is more commonly practiced in these countries. Inversely, the lack of participants from Central American and Caribbean-based countries would seem to indicate that there are fewer VE initiatives in these areas. In order to confirm these suppositions, greater efforts must be made to recruit administration, faculty, and students from this region. It is recommendable that larger

Latin American countries, with more established VE trajectories, seek institutional partners from Central America and the Caribbean to bolster interregional connections as well as diversify the perspectives shared via VE initiatives.

Latin American faculty and administrators who participated in the LatAm COIL network survey highlighted areas of opportunity such as the need for further training in online educational platforms and VE methodologies. Latin American universities would do well to harness the educational lessons learned during the COVID pandemic as to cultivate practices that favor student-centered teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and more flexible curricular planning. As professors feel more confident in their ability to design and implement online course materials at a local level, it should follow that their ability to carry out international VE projects would increase favorably.

In the way of VE planning and execution, concern was expressed regarding the inter institutional collaboration process. Therefore, professional development opportunities should focus on aspects of academic collaboration, such as the use of shared learning management systems, approaches to co-teaching, and how to recognize and manage differences in academic cultures. Mentorship programs that pair experienced with less experienced faculty could be another useful tool to aid the VE design and implementation processes. To this end, open-access, easily navigable online resources must be developed to catalog institutional VE participants. This resource would ideally pair partners according to their academic discipline, preferred VE dates and duration, and preferred language(s).

Survey participants made clear that aside from design and implementation challenges, there are also administrative barriers to participating in VE. Many of these challenges are related to how faculty's participation in international efforts will be recognized and compensated. Some ideas may include granting course releases to compensate for the time and energy invested in developing VE programs as well as factoring VE participation into faculty's workload agreements and performance evaluations. Lastly, to establish sustainable curricular internationalization, VE projects must be integrated into a regularly offered course at each institution. This alleviates the footwork involved in creating new VE programs thus allowing for more time and resources to be dedicated to recruiting students and faculty members to participate in current VE projects.

This study was limited by uneven representation of survey respondents as the overwhelming majority were from Mexico and Colombia. Future studies should seek a more even participant number from each country. Furthermore, future research regarding VE in Latin America may offer an in-depth exploration of the connection between instructors' experiences with online teaching and their participation in VE projects. Lastly, an open-access catalog of VE projects carried out in

Latin America and their learning objectives and institutional partners would help researchers to establish a more complete panorama of VE practices in this world region.

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Appendix 1: Survey questions

La Red Latinoamericana de COIL

Gracias por participar en esta encuesta cuyo propósito es recolectar datos sobre los integrantes de la Red de COIL en América Latina. Los datos que usted proporcione formarán parte de presentaciones y publicaciones académicas. Sus respuestas serán anónimas y no se asociará su nombre con ningún dato.

1. ¿Con cuál universidad se asocia usted?

_____

2. ¿Cuál es su posición en la universidad?

○ profesor

○ estudiante

○ administrador

○ Otro _____

3. ¿Cuántos años tiene usted?

- ○ 21-29
- ○ 30-39
- ○ 40-49
- ○ 50-59
- ○ 60-69
- ○ 70+

4. ¿Qué idioma(s) habla usted? Marque todos los que se apliquen.

- ☐ español
- ☐ portugués
- ☐ inglés
- ☐ Otro

5. ¿Cuál es su campo académico principal?

○ humanidades (lenguas, cultura)

○ ciencias

○ tecnología

○ salud

○ negocios

○ Otro _____

6. ¿Ha participado usted en algún intercambio internacional (en calidad de estudiante o instructor)? Describa por qué participó en la experiencia y cómo le fue.

_____

7. Si usted nunca ha participado en un intercambio internacional describa por qué.

_____

8. ¿Cómo se enteró de la Red Lationamericana de COIL?

○ una colega

○ el internet

○ la universidad

○ Otro _____

9. ¿Por qué se hizo socio de la Red Latinoamericana COIL?

_____

10. ¿Cuánto sabe usted de la metodología COIL?

○ Mucho

○ Poco

○ Nada

11. ¿Alguna vez usted ha implementado la metodología COIL u otra metodología de intercambio virtual?

○ Sí

○ No

12. ¿Piensa usted participar en algún taller o capacitación sobre la metodología COIL?

○ Sí

○ No

○ No estoy seguro/a

13. ¿En cuál idioma preferiría recibir entrenamiento/capacitación para la metodología COIL?

○ inglés

○ español

○ portugués

14. ¿Busca un par institucional para realizar un intercambio virtual?

○ Sí

○ No

○ Quizás

15. ¿Cómo podría la Red Latinoamericana de COIL facilitar la búsqueda de un par institucional?_____

16. Actualmente, ¿su universidad participa en alguna iniciativa de intercambio virtual? Favor de describir la respuesta. _____

17. Para realizar un intercambio internacional ¿Desea un par institucional de su mismo campo académico?

○ Sí

○ No

○ Da igual

18. ¿Cómo sería el par institucional ideal para usted?

_____

19. Describa cómo un intercambio internacional complementaría la materia/el curso que enseña usted.

_____

20. ¿Cuál es el idioma en el cual prefiere realizar el intercambio virtual?

○ español

○ inglés

○ portugués

○ bilingüe (una combinación de idiomas)

21. ¿Cuál es la duración que desea para un intercambio virtual?

○ 2-3 semanas

○ 4-6 semanas

○ 8 semanas

○ el semestre entero

22. ¿Cuál es su mayor preocupación al entablar un intercambio virtual con otro país/institución académica?

○ la comunicación

○ la tecnología

○ compartir el curriculum

○ la planificación del programa

23. Describa los resultados deseados de participar en un intercambio virtual internacional.

_____

24. Antes de la pandemia, ¿cuál era su medio de enseñanza principal?

○ presencial

○ híbrido (presencial y virtual)

○ virtual o en línea

25. Antes de la pandemia ¿Qué porcentaje de los cursos en su carrera se ofrecían en línea?

○ 40-50%

○ 20-30%

○ 10%

○ 5%

○ 0%

26. ¿Cuál sistema usan los estudiantes y profesores para acceder los materiales relacionados a su curso?

○ Ninguno

○ Moodle

○ Canvas

○ Teams

○ Otro _____

27. ¿Cuál es el medio más popular de comunicación entre profesor y estudiante?

○ email

○ en persona

○ facebook

○ WhatsApp

○ Otro _____

28. ¿Qué le gustaría que se les ofreciera a los participantes dentro de la Red LatAm COIL?

_____

29. Favor de escribir su correo electrónico si está dispuesto a ser entrevistado sobre el intercambio académico. _____