Integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and community service in the student journey

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As the first positive university in the world, Tecmilenio University prides itself on the promotion of wellbeing and happiness throughout the student journey. We seek to design and implement experiences for students that will enable them to find a meaningful life purpose by employing their character strengths as they build their professional competencies. With the purpose of providing an opportunity for students to explore ways in which they can "leave their mark" in the world, the Tecmilenio University designed and implemented a crosscutting strategy for SDG action with the Positive Action program. Tecmilenio University recognized the opportunity to transform students into agents of change by capitalizing on the 480 hours community service required by law in Mexico for all undergraduate students and using it as a social impact-service learning opportunity. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as frame of reference for addressing local challenges, and teach students about the most pressing issues of our time. Through partnerships with local nonprofit organizations, students learn firsthand about local problems. Most importantly, students are able to contribute by proposing a solution to identified challenges. In this paper, we will explore how the community service program in Tecmilenio University has evolved, the challenges it has seen, and how we plan to measure success. In March of 2020, the program underwent unforeseen changes and adaptations due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We will start by exploring the beginning of the community service requirement, and continue with the description and evolution of the Positive Action program at Tecmilenio University.

Community service requirement in Mexico

In the late 1930´s, Mexico began institutionalizing the community service as a graduation requirement at the undergraduate level at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The Federal Government wanted to make deep reforms to the Mexican education system. As a result, some institutions, like UNAM pushed back. In 1935, UNAM and the Mexican Federal Government reached an agreement instating the *servicio social* (community service), according to Ramírez López (2012):

> *Se implantará en todas las facultades y escuelas universitarias [el] Servicio Social obligatorio para obtener [un] título universitario. Dicho servicio deberá prestarse en colaboración con el Gobierno de la República por medio de sus dependencias. Al efecto se preparará debidamente a los estudiantes impartiéndoseles cursos especiales sobre nuestros principales problemas.*

> *Mandatory Community Service is to be implemented in all of its academic areas and schools to obtain a university degree. Said service should be conducted in collaboration with the Federal Government through its ministries. To the effect of preparing students accordingly teaching them special courses about our principal problems.*

The agreement evolved, and making into a law by 1945, requiring all undergraduate students to do 480 hours of community service work as a prerequisite to obtain the undergraduate degree. For students pursuing degrees in the medical field, the law states that social service must be performed after having completed all academic courses. For all other fields of study, students complete the community service work before completing the academic requirements. Public and private higher education institutions have established internal policies and programs for students to comply with this requirement. A common practice has been for students to find local organizations that are not for profit nor religious or political in nature, and volunteer for them in exchange for a letter that certifies 480 of community service. This approach gives the students the liberty of choosing when, where, how and with whom they work, while it empowers the student to focus their work in areas of their interest, unfortunately it also delved into undesirable practices such as organizations taking advantage of students work, or students looking for the "easy" way out. With this approach, it was not possible to know what students learned and how they were contributing to society.

Tecmilenio and SDG Education

Before delving into Tecmilenio's solution to having students contribute significantly to society, we explain basic information about the University. Tecmilenio offers, high school, undergraduate and graduate programs in 31 campus spread across Mexico reaching over 60,000 students. Tecmilenio University's mission is for students to find their life's purpose and have professional competencies to attain it. As such, Tecmilenio sees the community service requirement as an opportunity to get students closer to the transcendence aspect of their life's purpose. For students to see beyond themselves and use their character strengths, skills, abilities and time to contribute to the development of their communities.

Using the SDGs as a framework allows students to learn about local and global challenges that require attention and immediate action from all sectors of society. According to UNESCO (2019), education for sustainable development "empowers everyone to make informed decisions in favour of environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations". Tecmilenio's interest in teaching about the SDGS goes beyond guiding students through a meaningful community service. The intention of the University is for students to be aware about current challenges, learn how firsthand how organizations contribute to solving them, and for students to be able make informed decisions today and later in life. The SDGs unite us to look for solutions to challenges experienced globally and they provide clear paths and indicators to formulate actionable solutions.

Tecmilenio University saw the opportunity to capitalize on the 480 hours community service requirement and along with the SDGs, use it as a social impact-service learning opportunity. Since 2016, Tecmilenio has been perfecting the community service model. The first launch of the program, *Servicio Social Significativo* (Meaningful Community Service) was in the fall of 2016. The purpose was to ensure students were prepared to start their community service and guide them through a meaningful experience where students could use their character strengths and skills to provide a significant service to the community, as well as to get them closer to the transcendence aspect of their purpose in life. All students starting their second year were required to take a weekly one and half hour workshop, *Servicio Social Significativo*, to guide and prepare

them for the community service. In this first version, during the workshop, students learned about the SDGs and were encouraged to choose an area of interest, for example education, gender equality, hunger, etc. After choosing one of the SDGs, staff at the University organized a fair on campus. Local non-for profit organizations came to the fair to offer a place for students to complete their required 480 hours of community service. After choosing an organization, aligned to their area of interest, students began their community service work and continued to attend the weekly workshop. In the workshop, students reflected on their experience during their community service work and shared with others how they were contributing. After two semesters, students completed the community service requirement. The program proved to be a success in the sense that students chose from vetted organizations and the teacher in the workshop guided students and their work. After two semesters, Tecmilenio University could say that all of the students, upwards of 3,000 students, had learned about the SDGs, and provided a meaningful service to their community in partnership with local non-for profit organizations.

The challenges encountered were relating to the lack of options presented to students during the Community Service Fair. Some campus were able to create agreements with 10 or more community organizations, however other campus only had between 4 to 6 options, sometimes less, for a cohort of up to 100 students. The lack of options meant students were not being able to choose an area of interest for their community service work, and were choosing based on convenience, the option that best suited their schedule. Additionally, students occasionally commented that it was not always possible for them to use their *competencias profesionales* (professional competencies), skills and knowledge related to their field of study, during their community service work. In short, if we consider that the purpose of the community service requirement is for students to use their skills, knowledge and abilities in benefit of their community and to foster a sense of solidarity, the *Servicio Social Significativo (meaningful community service)* was achieving its goal partially.

By the fall of 2017, Tecmilenio decided to launch a pilot of a new version of the program and named it *Accion Positiva* (Positive Action). Implementing the program in three campus in the fall of 2017, and the extending it to six campus by the fall of 2018.

Program Logo.

The revised version of the community service program continued to integrate SDG education during the first semester workshop, as well as guidance to identify and choose a nonprofit to collaborate with based on student's character strengths and interest. The main difference between the *Servicio Social Significativo* and the Positive Action program was that the second asked students to design and implement an innovative solution-based project based on the challenges students found in the organization or community. The workshop included sessions that guided the student through a *diagnostico*

participativo (interview-based research) to identify challenges in the organization or community they were working with and in teams design a project proposing a solution.

As displayed in diagram 1 and 2, during the Positive Action Program, students go through four phases, guided by a teacher: exploring, designing, transforming and inspiring. During the exploring phase, students learn about SDGs, make teams with other students, chose an organization, learn about the local challenges and research about problems or areas of opportunity within the organization and in the community. Next, in the designing phase, students used the results from the previous phase to design a project to solve a challenge or problem identified through the exploration phase. These first two phases happen during the fall semester. Students continue to attend the weekly workshop, and work in the organization. With the approved project, students began the spring semester in the transforming phase. This phase is about the implementation of the project and gathering evidence and results. The workshop turns into a bimonthly review with the teacher to share progress on the implementation of the project. At the end of the semesters, with the results of the project, students go into the Inspiring phase. This last phase is about students inspiring others by sharing the results of their work. Every campus holds an internal competition to select the project that has proven to be transformative and impactful. The winner of each campus then represents its campus on the National Competition *Transformación 2030 (Transformation 2030)*.

Diagram 1. Explains the model of community service program, Positive Action. The student at the center, including the student's life purpose, professional competencies and character strengths. The outside circle describes the four phases: exploring, designing, transforming and inspiring.
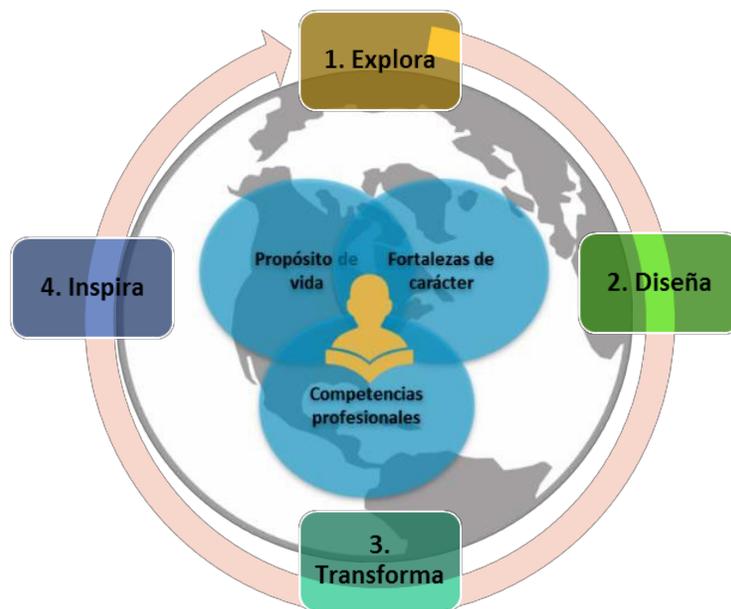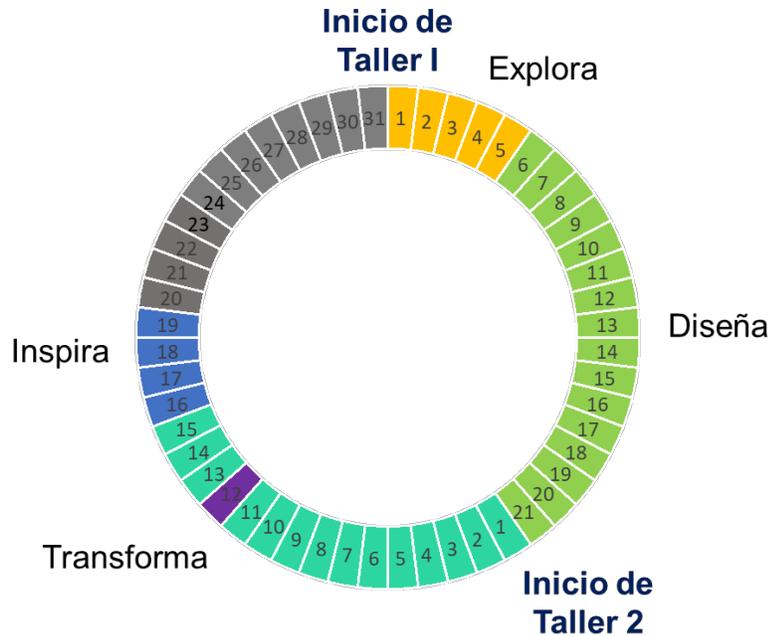
Diagram 2. Displays the phases of the Positive Action program by number of weeks for the workshop 1 that students take during the fall semester, and workshop 2 during the spring semester.

In October of 2019, the first national competition included the presentation for the winners of the six campus that implemented the pilot program. The winning team of the first held national competition was a team from Campus Ferrería that was working at an aquarium and they saw the opportunity to create QR Codes linked to videos to translate the guided tour using sign language. They had chosen SDG 10, Reducing Inequalities, and with the implementation of the project, hearing impaired visitors to the aquarium could now experience the guided tour as well. Tecmilenio realized that by fostering students' creativity and *ganas (willingness)* to contribute significantly to society, they had the potential to create projects that could have a great impact in the communities and additionally, impact students' sense of solidarity and commitment to others.

Survey results and key findings

The pilot programs in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years, in 6 out of 29 campuses had a total participation of 1,200 students. Students responded to a survey to measure satisfaction, the results indicated a 4.2 out 6-approval rating, and 100% approval from the teachers and staff. Additionally, 80% of students mentioned the program helped them to contribute positively to society. In close collaboration with local CBOs, teams developed and implemented 65 projects linked to at least one SDG.

In the fall of 2019, Positive Action program implementation went nationwide, in all 26 campus for 3,300 students, registering 1,100 community-based projects. Due to the pandemic and the challenge of continuing with the implementation of the projects, teams quickly scrambled to come up with ways in which to continue to provide service to the

community. We consider that the results of the first nationwide implementation of Positive Action are impacted by the pandemic and the challenges students experienced to complete the program. However, all 3,300 students completed their community service requirement.

We assess the program in two ways, measuring student experience and students citizenship profile. At the end of the two workshops and having completed their community service requirement all students are encouraged to respond to a questionnaire. As table 1 shows, the compared results for students completing the program in May 2019 and May 2020 cohorts show little variation, although the responses from the cohort of May 2019 are slightly more positive. These responses tell us that most students are inspired, motivated and proud of their community work; however, we are still far from reaching desired results where all students have a meaningful and fulfilling experience.

Table 1. Average responses from 2019 and 2020 cohorts

Year	My community service is meaningful and purposeful (1-6)	I am inspired by my community work. (1-6)	I am proud of the work that I do in my community service. (1-6)	Do you think the community service program helped you use your professional competencies in benefit of your community? (1-10)	Do you think the community service program helped you use your character strengths for the benefit of your community? (1-10)	Do you think the community service program helped you provide a meaningful service to your community? (1-10)
2019	5.094	5.011	5.25	8.07	8.76	8.85
2020	5.05	4.96	5.24	8.01	8.67	8.77

Tecmilenio established a partnership with a nonprofit called *Más Ciudadanía* (More Citizenship). Through this collaboration, Tecmilenio students are able to create a citizenship profile. By answering questions about their civic and social or community engagement, students identify their citizenship profile: inhabitant, indifferent, passive citizen, active citizen, and model citizen. Between September 2019 and march 2020, 2,637 profiles were created, as shown in table 2. Students will continue to be encouraged to update their citizenship profiles throughout their student journey and most importantly to continue to contribute.

Table 2. Citizen profiles from 2020 cohort.

Citizenship Profile	Number of Profiles
Model Citizen	0
Active Citizen	457
Passive Citizen	959
Indifferent Citizen	969
Habitant	135
Not disclosed	110

As we measure student experience and citizenship, we also want to know more about the projects the students design and implement. Due to the size of the University, data collection is a challenge we are trying to overcome. For the cohort that started in August of 2019, we were able to collect key data. The projects designed and implemented by the students from the 2019 cohort had to be aligned to one or more of the SDGs. There were 1,100 projects registered, and table 3 shows the number of projects related to the SDGs.

Table 3. Total of projects by SDGs

SDG	Number of projects
1	386
2	286
3	863
4	623
5	186
6	193
7	62
8	160
9	84
10	280
11	250
12	293
13	254
14	67
15	279
16	219
17	324

Project type varied from fundraising events, to community work, blood drives, recycling campaigns, and working in schools, shelters, hospitals, or designing innovative solutions within organizations. Having this data allows us to know the interests of the students, and we are working on perfecting our data collection process in order to measure the impact of the projects.

Conclusions

In January of 2019, Tecmilenio became a member of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network reaffirming its commitment to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals. With the Positive Action program, Tecmilenio developed an innovative way of linking the community service requirement with the 2030 Agenda. With the integration of the SGD curriculum and with the collaboration of local CBOs,

Tecmilenio ensures that students learn about local challenges and ways to address them. We continue to innovate and evolve, and for the fall of 2020 we have continued to learn from the implementation of Positive Action. The content of the workshop is revised and updated. There are 5 sessions dedicated exclusively to SDGs and student's activities include a mapping of their communities using the SDGs as framework. After learning about the SDGs and how these are reflected in their communities (using municipal data, interviews, mapping, among other strategies), students will go through the phases of design thinking in order to design and implement a project using a human center approach. The year-to-year comparison will allow Tecmilenio to continue to perfect the Positive Action program and continue to teach students about the SDG to get them closer to their purpose in life and ways in which they can transcend by having a positive impact in their communities.

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