

## **BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE** **UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA**

The Universidad de Antioquia is a public land - grant type university founded in 1803 by authorization from the king of Spain. We must remember that independence wars began in 1810 therefore the prolegomena of this foundation as well as its beginning must have been deeply influenced by these historical processes. It was the Jesuits who began the College with liberal arts as their major asset; and during the whole 19th century the German pedagogy was enacted along with the French more practically oriented system. Only after the second half of the 20th Century the disciplinary and departmental structure of North América was introduced.

The Universidad has always been dealing with political dilemmas. Born at the end of monarchy, growing with the dreams of freedom, maturing with republican as well as federalist movements, but always associated with the fate of the state of Antioquia; although this university has become the Alma Mater for many Colombians, independently of their region of origin.

This institution is the second largest public university in the country, with around 20.000 students. The budget derives from the central government and from the state. As to today, the university is making great efforts to adapt its organizational structure to the

new demands of the neoliberal economy and, at the same time, it is expanding its reach to far away territories around the periphery of the state.

As mentioned above the structure is disciplinary, with schools and departments as the vertical axis with very few connecting instances or projects. Even though the institution has practically all the disciplines and professions (only agronomy is absent and only because the Universidad Nacional has it a few meters away), it keeps being too classic in its offerings and the forms of delivery. Fortunately things are changing for good with transversal organizations to replace vertical structures, and groups and teams becoming more important in a background of decline of the resilient departments.

Emergencies attributable to these organizational changes are coming along too. One of them being the doctoral programs that only after joining efforts from different disciplines and diverse schools and departments was possible in 1996 after almost 200 hundred years of history. The biomedical sciences were the first, but Philosophy, Physics and Education are also underway.

During the last two decades the Colombian government has, for the first time, spent considerable amounts of money to R&D and graduate programs were consequently possible. A legal structure has been created to maintain high levels of funding, but it is no surprise that now, in 1999, there is an economic crisis that is imperiling what ever good was done in the most recent history.

The Universidad de Antioquia has been the most important social project in the State with significant implications for the whole nation. Consequently it becomes a very sensitive indicator of the social temperature. The two centuries of history of the institution are the very same 200 years of building the nation. This process has run altogether with the internal wars and deep contradictions among the monarchist and the republicans, the church and the laic, the centralists and the federalists, the practical versus the philosophical, the liberals versus the conservatives and, more recently, the fuzzier war between the right and the left.

Social crises have always impinged upon the University. Nowadays - August, 1999 - assassinations, ostracism, despair, stress, uncertainty, are becoming part of the academic panorama. But we keep up! With faith! Trying to bend the path of the Universidad and therefore the history of Colombia toward an equilibrated development of the potential of the people in harmony with the environment and with the new age of postmodern landscapes and possibilities.

The Universidad de Antioquia is sticking out to the new century as a research university and it is willing to accept all the responsibilities associated with it. A lot has to be learned from the peers who have gone through this evolution: discussing the dilemmas of teaching versus research, adapting the structure to promote multidiscipline and transdiscipline, becoming more critic of its own thinking, defining how the institution does what it does. Only through this process could the university take the path of improvement in a sustainable manner.

Only four years from now the Universidad de Antioquia will commemorate its bicentennial and the institution is preparing for it with a new major curricular change that is already underway. We only hope that by then we also have a chance to inaugurate a new social contract for a new century of peace and wellbeing. Then, the most salient hallmarks for the history of the institution would be the academic achievements of a learning community rather than political struggles and violence.