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Puebla, Mexico Actuarial Conference Report
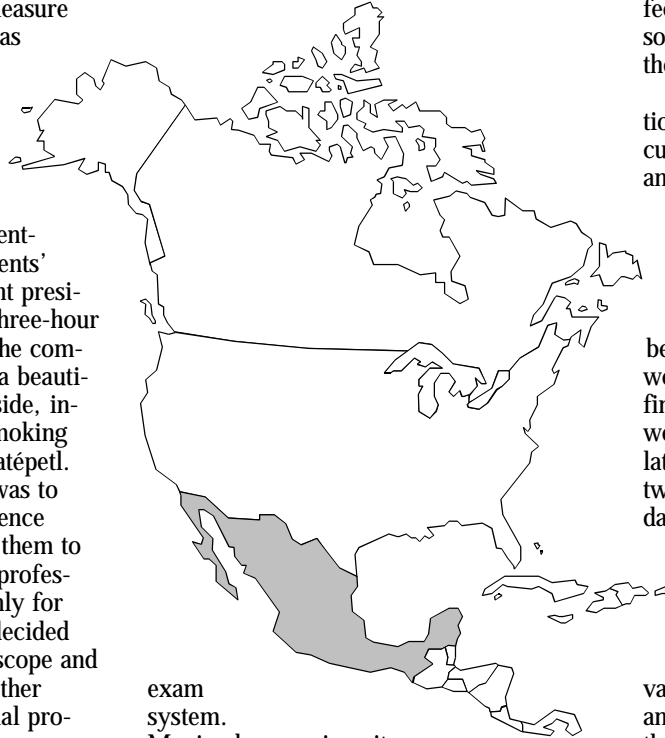
by Jim Toole

In March of 1997 I had the pleasure of visiting Universidad De Las Americas (UDLA) in Puebla, Mexico, for the 11th annual actuarial student congress. After meeting Sam Gutterman in Mexico City, we were accompanied by Francisco "Paco" Chong (president-elect of the UDLA actuarial students' association), Jorge Rueda (current president), and Kathia Pozos for the three-hour ride into Puebla. In addition to the company, Sam and I were treated to a beautiful view of the Mexican countryside, interrupted by the snow-capped, smoking crown of the pre-eruption Popocatépetl.

The goal of the conference was to integrate students of actuarial science from around Mexico and expose them to different aspects of their chosen profession. Originally a symposium only for UDLA students, the organizers decided three years ago to broaden their scope and invite their colleagues from the other Mexican universities with actuarial programs.

The idea was a success, and recognizing the increasing opportunities arising from NAFTA, the organizers decided the time was right to invite speakers from the SOA and make it an international conference. Those of us who were fortunate enough to attend (over 170 students and speakers representing six universities and three countries) could not agree more.

Because this conference was the students' first contact with representatives from the SOA, it was appropriate for my first activity as the Society of Actuaries Ambassador in Mexico. While Sam provided a global overview of the profession, I tried to shed some light on the mysteries of the SOA exam system.

Mexico has a university-based system for actuarial certification, the final step being the completion and defense of a weighty thesis. The students were very eager to learn about the SOA exam process, and they hope to open an examination center in Puebla this fall. Other topics presented ranged from consulting issues to stochastic simulations and were often quite technical. The presentation by Dr. Herman Sabua on derivative products was very popular.

As you might expect, it was not all work and no play. The parties after the seminar were very well attended by students and speakers alike, the most memorable being a trip to what appeared to be a converted wine cellar attached to a hotel in nearby Cholula. A youthful Puebla "trova" singer (balladeer) provided entertainment which had the entire room on its feet in seconds, dancing and singing songs to which everyone seemed to know the words and the steps.

The UDLA actuarial student association is responsible for planning and executing the event, which takes a lot of time and effort. They must remain in contact with the other student organizations, plan the activities, and, of course, coordinate all the speakers and programs. In an impressive feat of "just in time" capabilities, the weekend before the meeting, program updates were solicited and incorporated into the final programs. Amazingly, students were even responsible for real time translation of the English presentations! Between the myriad of details (the badges, day planners, speaker gifts, the list goes on) and the quality of the program, I was very impressed by the capabilities of these young actuaries.

Although the conference is not a money-making venture, it does give valuable experience to both the organizers and the attendees, as they are exposed to the complexities of professional practice and the logistical details of organizing an event of this scope and magnitude. For the next conference in March 1998, they hope to bring students from the University of Waterloo and promote exchange programs with other universities in the U.S. For further information about attending or being a speaker, you can contact Linden Cole at the Society or Francisco Chong at 098091@udlapvms.pue.udlap.mx.

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