The Open University of Venezuela:
From Concept to Reality

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Introduction

The Universidad Nacional Abierta (UNA), the Open University of Venezuela, was first envisioned in 1977 by the Venezuelan Ministry of Education in an attempt to continue the "educational revolution" that was part of the Fifth National Plan for the economic and social development of the nation. UNA was viewed as a way to assist the development of a sector of students who could not enroll in traditional universities and needed an alternative system of education which did not require in-person attendance at classes. UNA was developed to deliver instruction through alternative means.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to describe the principles and orientation of UNA as it was first proposed in 1977, drawing extensively on the very first project description. This historical perspective is presented in Part I of this paper. Part II then presents an examination and reflection on the first 25 years of operation of the university in its attempt to meet the learning needs of Venezuelans through a distance education-based higher education institution.

Part I - The Original Concept of the Open University of Venezuela[1]

Background

The Universidad Nacional Abierta (UNA) was created to promote an "educational revolution". It was built on three fundamental and major policies - Education for Democratization, Education for Innovation, and Education for Autonomous Development.

>**Education for Democratization** is seen as the basic building block for a democratic society. In addition to instruction in how to participate as a responsible citizen, the policy defined a minimum level of nine years of basic education for all citizens that would allow people to actively participate in a modern society that was undergoing rapid and accelerating change, to assist in the reduction of disadvantages that may be due to socio-cultural origin, and to actively participate in local community-based organizations.

>**Education for Innovation** challenged the educational system to develop a viable capacity for innovation that would promote a high level of academic quality. In order to accomplish this it

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[1] Key ideas and concepts presented in Part I have been drawn from the initial project paper *The National Open University of Venezuela. Project.(1979)* Registro de Publicaciones de la Universidad Nacional Abierta. First English Edition, that was prepared in 1977 as a blueprint for the development of the Universidad Nacional Abierta

would be essential to a) transform the elite-oriented existing system of education to better fulfill the demands of mass education, b) incorporate into the educational process appropriate advances to support the theories, processes and technologies of contemporary education, and c) provide the student with a form of individualized education that would be relevant to his conditions, needs, and aspirations thereby stimulating his creative capacity and influencing the formation of meaningful values, motivations, attitudes, and conduct.

Education for Autonomous Development whereby the educational system must be seen as a coherent, articulated, and oriented whole which is primarily directed to satisfy the requirements of society, and its need for autonomous development.

These three policies clarified that Venezuelan education would not only meet learners' demands but it would also work to transform Venezuelan society through the development of a democratic foundation which could contribute significantly in the transformation of the existing economic, social, and cultural system.

Major Goals

It was in this context that the Universidad Nacional Abierta was first conceptualized to assist in the fulfillment of these very essential policies. UNA was proposed as an innovative and imaginative solution that would effectively collaborate in resolving the problems of higher education by bringing the opportunity and influence of higher education to people throughout the nation for the development of the country.

UNA would embody these three major "educational revolution" policies by extending higher education, both geographically and socially, throughout the nation (Education for Democratization), creating a more educated populous that could serve as human resources for scientific and technological development and for the analysis of and search for solutions to national problems (Education for Autonomous Development), and use an innovative conceptualization of higher education - distance education - which would be carried out through the use of modern educational technology and oriented towards an individualized form of teaching/learning that is creative and promotes change (Education for Innovation). UNA was created to offer an efficient, novel, highly productive, and low cost way to attend to the growing demand for higher education - not only by Secondary School graduates, but also, and in each passing year, in greater proportion, by working adults, professionals and technicians who seek professional qualifications and to continue to improve their competencies.

To be successful, UNA would have to attend to certain **societal sectors** of the population, both young and adult, who work or, for reasons of geographical dispersion, cannot attend conventional institutions of education. Second, in terms of **economic efficiency**, UNA would have to offer the possibility of absorbing a growing student enrollment with only moderate operational costs in the first stages, and later decreasing these operational costs. This would allow for the maximization of the existing higher education physical infrastructure and academic resources, both of which are scarce and costly and thus must be used efficiently. And finally, in terms of the **social learning setting**, UNA would have to provide a highly motivating and significant teaching-learning situation for the student that would lead to the preparation of professionals with the capacity for rationale, critical thought, and creativity and who would be capable of working in multi-disciplinary teams in order to intelligently face the problems of development in a world situation of mutual dependence and multiple influences and alternatives.

Objectives of UNA

With these major goals as a foundation, three groups of specific objectives were developed to guide the operation of UNA from inception.

Institutional Objectives
-To form human resources for priority areas of socio-economic development at short, medium, and long range. Special emphasis to be given to the formation, professionalization, and up-grading of teachers.
-To prepare professionals who will act upon the social system as agents for the qualitative change demanded by the nation.
-To establish in the country a special sector of the instructional and administrative system of higher education, responding to a multi-sectorial approach. To encourage full participation of both public and private sectors in the planning and implementation of programs of UNA.
-To adjust the economic contribution of the State to UNA, to the fulfillment of national policies of human resource development, full employment, and optimization of the ability of Venezuelans to increase both production and productivity.
-To develop research for the solution of problems posed by the priority areas of development.
-To foster, through cultural action, the enrichment of the Venezuelan people with authentic values of a national culture, and the values of Latin American and world cultures

Functional Objectives
-To develop, implement, and administer new strategies of teaching-learning, to heighten the economic efficiency, and to maximize the effectiveness of available resources.
-To carry out research, to evaluate experiences in the new fields of open and at-a-distance education, coordinating UNA's activities with actions being carried out by the Ministry of Education in the area of educational technology at other educational levels.
-To structure UNA's teaching-learning system as a modular system of learning, allowing the user to progress through the various stages of professionalization until reaching a high level of specialization.
-To produce a change of attitudes among users of UNA in order to reverse the relationship of responsibility existing in the traditional learning systems. UNA's user should take responsibility for his learning and the institution should do everything necessary to make this possible in terms of offering alternatives and resources which optimize the process of instruction.
-To organize the learning resources into strategies for the development of opportunities for permanent and recurrent education, making it possible to support professional development, the recycling of human resources, updating of abilities and knowledge, and cultural enrichment.

Operational Objectives
-To optimize the efficiency of educational investment with the aim of lowering the costs per student and per program, through the application of the criterion of economy of scale.
-To cooperate in the rationalized expansion of the higher education system to permit the modification of the present distribution norms of post-secondary educational opportunities in the different socio-economic levels of the population.
-To cooperate with other higher education institutions so that they may increase in efficiency and effectiveness.

Key Characteristics

A group of specific characteristics were identified to guide the actual offerings of the Universidad Nacional Abierta. These characteristics, inherent in the process of massive and distant education, served to strengthen the focus of the institution as an "open university." To begin, UNA would have **full national coverage to** ensure that there would be a close relationship between UNA and the different ecological, geo-economical, and social areas of the country. This would be accomplished through its local and regional centers and its students. A **diversification of programs** would provide the foundation for numerous careers, research, extension and the enhancement of a national culture. And, as **a social oriented Institution** it would include both a young and adult population that, due to labor, social, economic, geographic, or physical limitations, had not been able to enter or successfully continue in formal higher education. UNA would allow the student to remain in his geographical, social, and labor medium, thus allowing his direct and continued interaction with his surroundings and the reality with which he would continue to function.

One of the more essential characteristics was that UNA would be built around the use of a **self/independent learning system.** The student, with appropriate orientation, would set his own objectives in harmony with those suggested by the program and through each instructional module. The student, not having to attend classes on a regular/synchronous schedule, would be empowered to administer his own time, to study at his own rhythm, and to perform self evaluation. This would be accomplished through a **mediated interactive system of education** which would include the planned use of human and material resources designed to aid learning. Among these resources would be consultations, study groups, printed modules (the foundational media in the curriculum), television/radio programs and computer-delivered instruction, all of which would constitute the major channels of communication with the student.

And finally, UNA would work to **interact and cooperate with other educational systems** throughout the nation to conduct extension and investigation of learning processes within higher education for the purpose of not only improving its own programs but to also positively affect the programs of the rest of the sub-system of higher education and with the educational system as a whole.

A Model for Curriculum Development

The curricular model of the Universidad Nacional Abierta was founded on the following considerations:

> **Reality** - The starting point for the personal and professional formation of the student would be constituted by the nature, characteristics, and necessities of the reality, the location of the individual within this reality and the possibility of introducing positive changes in that reality through the means of knowledge. Reality is the object of knowledge.
> **Student as an Adult Learner** - The student is an adult who is capable of contributing to his own development as well as that of the country. Through the increase in his capacity for formal, critical, and creative thought, the student will be able to confront reality, identify problems, and work towards their solution. The student is the subject and can also be the object of knowledge.
> **Science Is Subject to Change and Re-validation**. Through his formation, the student is able to apply scientific and technological knowledge to the solution of real problems and

collaborate in the development of science itself and its relationship to National Development. Science may be the media with which the knowledge of the reality is attained, and is at the same time the object of knowledge.

Instruction Based on Application - Instruction is conceived as the concrete existence of a set of opportunities/experiences which permit the subject to interact with the reality, and seek out solutions to its problems. Through this process, the student gains or increases his personal and professional formation.

Interaction Between Theory and Practice - Instruction, understood as the interaction between theory and practice and between knowledge and reality, encourages the interaction between teaching/learning and investigation. Instruction, in the special case of UNA, would also integrate teaching, investigation, and extension to fulfill the obligation of education to the community. The relationship between subject and object is brought about through the effective interaction between theory and practice.

Education At-a-Distance - UNA programs, fundamentally for adults learning at a distance, would artfully combine communications media as a key aspect of instruction which differentiates the progressive and formative educational plan from the more formal system.

The curriculum of UNA and the learning opportunities would permit the student, from his point of entry, to systematize his own experiences, increase his knowledge of reality, identify problems and the alternatives for their solution, participate in the solution of these problems through the application of science and technology, and contribute to the growth of certain areas of science itself. The curricular model presents the opportunity for the identification of the problems of the reality, the statement of solutions for the detected problems, and the expansion of science. The teaching-learning process permits the establishment of the relation between reality and knowledge; between theory and practice, and between teaching, investigation, and extension; using the store of experiences that the participant brings, as well as the new system of education-work relations which is characteristic of education at-a-distance.

Key Aspects of the UNA Curriculum

There are a number of curricular elements that are integral to the operation of UNA.
The Learning Module Instruction in the Universidad Nacional Abierta would be provided through learning modules, a central element in the UNA curriculum, which are structured sets of self-instructional units that form part of a course and/or program of studies. The instructional design of the modules interprets the objectives established in the curricular designs of the programs of study that are offered by UNA.

The module, a key organizing element for both students and instructional designers, would contain print material, mass media presentations (broadcast via television and radio); support learning materials (audio-cassettes, video cassettes, bibliographic materials, etc.), individualized experimental equipment, practicums in industry and/or institutions, academic counseling and orientation, laboratory experiences in UNA and/or in other academic institutions, computer-based learning activities and social integration experiences. The programming model of the module is based, fundamentally, on the hypothesis that the lesser the degree of subjectivity in the determination of the content and processes of learning/teaching, the greater the probability of attaining a higher learning rate. In other words, technology is incorporated into the design in order to obtain a highly structured material which permits efficient self-instruction.

Modules would use the results of investigation and educational theories adapted to the Venezuelan

situation, in order to guarantee the integral development of the student. The modules would take into account the student's adulthood and his potential for contributing to the qualitative social change that the Nation demands.

The structure of the module is very simple and is composed of the following components:

1. **Module title** and code identification
2. **A Listing of Related Modules** - that comprise an entire course of instruction.
3. **Module Introduction** - consisting of a brief explanation of the contents of the module, its importance, and its relation to the other modules in the course.
4. **A Listing of the Units Within the Module** - providing the student with a perspective of the time and effort needed for appropriate study of the module.
5. **Identification of Other Media That the Student Can Use** - this may include descriptions of educational counseling, group learning experiences, radio and television programs, bibliographic material, experimentation equipment, apprenticeships and other media to re-enforce the content of the printed units and to assist in the integration of objectives.
6. **The Timetable** - a basic instrument to show the student the distribution of the assigned tasks with regards to the time that will be needed in order to be successfully carried out. It is a vital instrument by which the student can be better oriented within the study process, showing him the necessary adjustments in his rhythm of learning and possibilities of recuperation of certain lags in the proposed program.
7. **The Units** - each unit to be preceded by a self-evaluation with its correction key and instructions for the student.
8. **An Introduction** - containing the presentations of the theme, motivation for the student, and the objectives (specified as a set of "behaviors") that the student is expected to attain by the end of the unit.
9. **The Contents** - presented through the units of information required for the achievement of the objectives.
10. **The Guide/Test** - a self-evaluation to provide the student the opportunity to perceive his basic knowledge, the most difficult objectives to attain, and the aspects that will be necessary to put emphasis upon in his learning process.
11. **The Development of the Contents** - the most extensive part of the Unit. It contains a full pedagogical development of the instruction with a close relationship to the objectives and with the utilization of teaching strategies established in the instructional design.
12. **The Final Test of the Unit** - permits the student to demonstrate his learning accomplishment with respect to the objectives.
13. **Remedial Instruction** - suggested activities that can be carried out by the student in order to resolve any learning deficiencies and/or to re-enforce the objectives of the Unit.
14. **The Final Test of the Module** - a summative evaluation of the module; it is applied as a face-to-face test by the University and contains all the elements considered necessary to judge the attainment of the objectives.

Other Instructional Media Besides the learning modules, UNA would offer other media to assist students in their learning experiences. Radio and TV programs would provide other learning elements not possible through the written materials, such as practice and demonstrations, as a re-enforcement of the existing instructional plan. It is not a simple structuring of classes by radio and/or television, but rather providing the student with other learning elements to attain the objectives more completely.

Radio and TV programs would be produced by "instructional design units", like the ones used for written materials. These units would include a content specialist, an instructional designer and an audiovisual expert who decide on the characteristics of the instructional material to be developed.

Radio programs, as well as television, are systematically broadcast. Before the broadcasts the student receives print materials related to the programs so that he may prepare himself and obtain greater benefit from the broadcasts.

These materials are also available to UNA students at Local Learning Resources Centers where the student is able to hear the radio recordings, complement them with visual material, or repeat the transmission recorded on video cassettes

The Local Centers Local Centers are important elements in the delivery of the whole instructional process. Students attend Local Centers trying to solve a variety of problems and needs, which range from administrative to personal and instructional. Local Centers are found in each of the 22 states of Venezuela and, depending on the geographical size of the state, there may also be Support Units which link to the Center.

There are Learning Resources at every Local Center which provides a library service including books, reading guides, copies of special chapters (pointed out in the module and/or unit), complementary books, microfilms, etc. The student can also receive help in identifying audio-visual materials that exist in the Local Center that will specifically re-enforce his learning as well as other materials that can be used to sum up concepts or deepen knowledge.

In general, the Local Centers have the installations and comforts necessary to lend logistical support and counseling to the UNA student in each phase of his instruction. At the same time, the Local Center is where the student receives the media with which he will carry out activities that require the development of skills. Local Centers are administered by a Coordinator who acts according to institutional prescriptions.

Group Learning Experiences An element which receives special attention in the instructional design of UNA is the necessity to interact, not only with instructional materials, but with faculty in the Local Centers as well other students. Among the means that assure the creation of situations that will be rich in possibilities for socialization and are most adequate for a distance education situation are group learning experiences. The group learning experiences give important benefits, as much from the student's point of view as from UNA's.

The principal advantages these group activities offer to the student are:

> -organized opportunities of great significance in the attainment of an integration of knowledge.
> - student support in their leaning process, so that he does not feel alone, a crucial problem in distance education, and develops a sense of belonging with the institution and fellow students.
> - an increased probability of remaining in the system and within a learning rhythm because of the external influence of collaboration on the task of acquiring knowledge and systematic work habits. This substitutes for the continuous re-enforcement the student receives in a for-mal face-to-face education setting.
> - a defined and set contact with a Local Center for receiving information about the University, clarification of doubts, and knowledge of the facilities available to him.

From the point of view of UNA, the existence of the group learning experiences provide for the ongoing supervision of the development of learning, and eventually, the opportune application of corrective measures. They also significantly increases the opportunity for student socialization and for his interaction with the Institution.

Part II - The Reality and the Challenges of the Open University of Venezuela

After the First Twenty-Five Years

The Universidad Nacional Abierta started in 1978 with seventeen thousand of students. By 1985 it was growing at a rate of 8% per year (Chacon, 1990). Today, UNA has approximately forty thousand students.

UNA had a number of problems right from the very beginning. Romero (1994) describes these as serious implementation problems. First, there was a rush to get the University up and functioning as quickly as possible. UNA immediately started registering students rather than providing enough time for the appropriate development and reproduction of most instructional materials, In addition, the instructional design model was incomplete and not fully designed.

At that time, UNA had to work hard for its credibility among the other Venezuelan higher education institutions. This was primarily due to UNA's unique approach to education whereby teaching was conducted through alternative means and without the need for face-to-face interaction. The other universities and potential employers questioned the quality of the human resources that would be used and their ability for providing a high quality of education.

However, the target population of learners was excited with the opportunity to study at an institution where they could enroll and complete their studies without the typical constraints found at traditional universities.

Major Policies, Goals and Objectives

UNA's major policies, goals and objectives have remained as they were originally envisioned in the initial Project Paper. These original policies, goals and objectives continue to influence most all of the institutional decisions - education has been guided by open access for all people, the curriculum has been open to all types of educational innovation, and the experiences of UNA are now recognized by the other Venezuelan higher education institutions and often copied by other universities. And most importantly, UNA actions are lead by societal needs.

Economics

One particularly difficult area for UNA has been economics. The dream of lowered costs as a result of an efficient and effective system of mass education has yet to be realized (Barrios, 1999). This has been partly a function of the general economic situation of Venezuela and also the relative value that the government places on UNA when compared to other institutions of higher education. UNA's current student enrollment, forty thousand students, is ten times the size of the next largest national university, Yet, the UNA budget is but a tenth of the amount of that institution. When viewed another way, we find that the UNA budget has only increased ten percent from that which was first

appropriated.

This situation has led to the extremely careful administration of resources which at times forces a sacrifice of quality instruction. As a consequence, UNA's instructional system cannot be as updated as desired, more modern means of communication - essential for an open university - are slow to be adopted, and the number of faculty, currently about 900, is insufficient to serve the large number of students.

Commitment to Students

Consistent with the original plan, UNA is committed to guaranteeing nationwide higher education opportunity. UNA still has its twenty Local Centers, and support units have been created to reach those students located in places far away from the Centers. The curricular offering still remains as originally conceived with students able to obtain degrees in Education (Pre-school, Learning Disabilities, Math, and Basic Education), Engineering (Systems and Industrial Engineering), Administration and Accounting, and Math (Analysis and Probabilistic).   And, agreements have been made with other higher education institutions so that it is possible for students to transfer credits and complete their studies at UNA.

Though UNA was originally planned to serve mainly adult/non-traditional students, Tugues (1998) reports that the number of students who are working at a job while taking classes at UNA has decreased. Though the median age of the student body remains high, 31 years, the number of young non-working students has continued to increase. Leal (2000) studied the characteristics of UNA students and found that they are most likely to have cognitive limitations, are lacking in abilities to successfully participate in independent study, have low motivation to remain at UNA and complete their studies, lack appropriate time for studying, have difficulty in being self-directed learners, exhibit interaction problems, have feelings of isolation, and instructional problems.

Research on the assertiveness of UNA students shows that those who obtain better grades tend to remain in the system. And, those who do not obtain good grades tend to quit (Chacón, 1990). It is also evident that an essential course for most students, one that strongly relates to later student success at UNA, is the Introductory Course. This course serves to help students learn to effectively plan their academic program and the amount of time that must be devoted to studying.

Completion rates at UNA, as can be expected, are low. Currently about 14% of those who begin their professional studies at UNA actually complete their degree (Contasti, 2000). The greatest percentage of students at UNA are majoring in the field of education, followed by administration and then engineering, with math being the smallest major. Completion rates follow a similar pattern with education being the highest.

Systems Approach

An important characteristic of UNA is the organization and operation of the institution as a systems approach whereby communication is the key element in the system. This demands viable communication between the various elements of the system that support the development and delivery of the curriculum.

Planning, instructional design, production, distribution, tutoring and evaluation are all components of the distance education system and must function in a coordinated manner. In actual practice, it has

been very difficult to balance all aspects of the system so that the various components operate in harmony and are mutually supportive of each other. The processes do not flow as they should. Chacón's (1990) research suggests that the lack of a coordinated systems approach to support distance education is not a problem unique to the curriculum of UNA but exists in other locations. Most Latin American distance education universities do not have such coordinated systems; those who write courses rarely teach them, tutors rarely participate in the elaboration of a course or instructional media, and the author of a course neither corrects exams, nor helps students with their difficulties.

Communication among program deans, the faculty who organize the instruction (all of whom are located in Caracas), the faculty at the Local Centers (who are spread all over the nation), between students and faculty at the national level, and among students does not flow easily. Even in today's world of high speed electronic communication the communication process within UNA relies mainly on written communication and respect for traditional organizational channels must be maintained. This greatly contributes to a process which is complicated and extremely bureaucratic (Barrios, 1999).

Curriculum Implementation

Further curriculum problems in the early years of UNA included the long time period needed for the development of instructional materials. At the beginning, self-instructional texts were designed and only 30% had audiovisual materials to complement them. State broadcasting systems became difficult, asystematic, and in some cases the coverage of the broadcasting system was not wide enough. Computer-based instruction was scarce at UNA's beginning. Today it is implemented mainly due to of the interest of the tutor and not as an institutional activity planned in the curriculum. Thus, administering learning processes in times of rapid changes and growth of knowledge is not easy for an institution that works on scarce resources.

The learning-evaluation process has always been a great challenge at UNA. Most courses use tests and assignments to measure outcomes and this is done through written tests which students must take in face-to-face situations, like traditional education. Questions continue to be raised regarding the validity and reliability of these means. Further, the ability of UNA to produce, reproduce and distribute tests to effectively measure student learning is not well functioning. Yet, and just like other distance education institutions, no alternative procedure has been found to evaluate learning.

Faculty

The tasks of tutoring at a distance have been studied by Bermúdez (in Chacón 1990). Bermúdez describes four main functions performed by the teacher/tutor as 1) clearing learner doubts, 2) guiding students in the use of complementary media, 3) correcting exams and assignments, and 4) counseling. If we look at the day-to-day experience of UNA it is easy to observe that tutors do not receive any systematic training to perform these tasks. The need to have effective tutor training programs for these four functions is paramount especially when considered in terms of the unique skills needed when teaching at a different location than that of the learners and working with a heterogeneous nationwide population.

Studies that have examined the relationship between teaching effectiveness and the number of students per tutor show that in distance education, as well as in traditional systems, learning results improve if the teacher-student ratio is low (Chacón, 1990). However, data from UNA's Programming Office

reveals that the number of students per professor was and still is extremely high. This problem became apparent when UNA's student population started to grow yet the number of faculty remained static. In addition, the average professor at UNA is responsible for teaching and evaluating from five to eight courses, all of them related to their professional background but with different content.

Major Challenges Yet To Be Faced

It is obvious that UNA requires a revision of its organizational model, using a less bureaucratized model, led by technological alliances with other institutions which can serve to empower UNA's action.

UNA's curricular model must be analyzed in terms of a new educational paradigm for teaching at a distance. There must be more attention paid to moving from self-instruction to collaborative learning (Tancredi, 2001). Instructional materials must be improved to better serve the diverse needs of a heterogeneous population. Updating these systems is a challenge, especially at this time when knowledge becomes so vast and changes emerge faster than actions designed to adjust to them. New technologies must be used to reach students in different and more efficient ways that are clearly reflective of the societal context.

It has become very clear that there exists an important and essential role for systematic research of all educational processes at UNA. Systematic research is needed to better identify student characteristics, needs, and instructional problems; the quality and efficiency of the many instructional processes; a profile of the type of professor best suited to serve UNA and its students; follow-up on the value of the UNA experience to UNA's alumni; and market and societal needs.

UNA must not compromise the quality of the teaching that is provided. An aggressive process for teacher development must be implemented so that needed tutor/teacher skills are developed and updated constantly. More efficient ways to deliver instruction must be found in order to increase the probability that the mass education offered by UNA is of the highest quality.

An intranet system should be developed to facilitate communications among Local Centers, integrate the faculty who are dispersed so widely, empower the use of existing resources and develop new media. It has also become evident that UNA must become more capable of linking to a global system of communication.

Curricular designs must be revised to make them more flexible so that UNA may respond more immediately and efficiently to emerging market needs. Extension education and continuing education programs must be developed as a major vehicle for offering flexible programming.

After twenty-five years of experience it has become clear that there exists many problems that must continue to be dealt with. However, UNA reaches out further each year and continues to gain strength and appears very capable of reaching its goals. Each year there is less and less doubt in people's minds regarding the potential of distance education systems. With the advent of new instructional technologies the idea of distance education as a viable form of learning, as opposed to face-to-face instruction, becomes more apparent. The potential for professors and students to substantively interact, even when separated in location and time, has been greatly enhanced as the availability of new technology improves. The power of those who control "information" and the "means" for delivering the information has decreased to the point where it is now becoming possible for a learner to go as far as he wants.

UNA should be proud of its achievements which have been accomplished under the most difficult of conditions. It is never easy to be one of the first to move into uncharted new areas. This has been the challenge for UNA and it has succeeded far more than could have been expected with the constraints that have existed throughout the first twenty-five years. UNA is poised today to meet the new challenges that lie ahead and to work to improve the pioneering system that it has established.

It has become apparent that the first twenty-five years have been used by UNA to establish a distance education presence for Venezuela. The challenge during the next period of time will be one of transition and the emergence of different perspectives. It will be essential that new initiatives be mounted, that new ideas be tried and that it all be accomplished with the speed that is demanded in today's world.

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