



**JOIN A
RESEARCH
INCUBATOR:
IT'S WORTH IT!**



Training in research and identifying the lines of interest in which students can develop their professional skills has been an opportunity for learning for the Research Incubator of Applied Economics of the Faculty of Economics. Those who have been part of this group underline the importance of working with Masters students and young researchers.

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The Research Incubator of Applied Economics at the Universidad del Rosario is a response to a mixture of concepts set forth in the book by Tom Apostol (a U.S. engineer and mathematician who specialized in analytic number theory) and the colloquiums hosted by Manuela Sanz de Santamaría in the colonial period, where a number of intellectuals from the country then known as Nueva Granada got together to discuss subjects they were interested in.

Darwin Cortés Cortés, the current director of the group, recalls that the incubator emerged at the end of the 20th century, in a very informal way, and how it was an initiative by a number of students who wanted to round off their formal studies. Between 2002 and 2003, it became part of the Faculty of Economics and turned into an important driving force in the training and selection of students who might join the “Young Researchers” program.

“Those outstanding students became young researchers and then enriched the Faculty as professors, after they got their post-graduate degrees and acquired professional experience,” Professor Cortés explains. In those years Andrés Zambrano and José Guerra were teachers at the Faculty and they got together with the idea of creating a venue for work along two lines: The first of discussion, and the second, training students in the basic skills of research.

In the first, a subject of interest in some field of economics was set forth and then studied in discussion groups, with guest speakers who joined in the debates with the students. Thematic groups which worked on subjects of common interest were also formed.

In the line which sought to develop skills, students were strengthened in the use of econometric methods, the handling of statistical packages and the use of word processors like LaTeX or Stata and some aspects of programming which were not included in the undergraduate curriculum at that time.

“Zambrano and Guerra were two very charismatic people who took on a load of things and that provided a very important thrust for the incubator. They also employed subtle methods of assessing

the candidates so that those who were chosen would participate out of a pure interest in the work. For example, the meetings were held on Friday evenings, which tested the commitment of those who were truly interested,” Cortés recalls, who was then a junior researcher at the university.

This way of working led the group to become a tool to strengthen the Faculty. “The incubator was a fundamental part of the change the Faculty went through in the same years, because it helped us to choose the students who were interested in research, who had the profile of very strong candidates since they belonged to the group of young researchers and would certainly follow the path of a postgraduate and later a doctorate degree,” Darwin Cortés explains.

Another founding member of the group is Paul Rodríguez, who is currently a professor at the Faculty too. “I met him when he was a student of mine in the Masters program, he later became a young researcher and worked with me on his thesis and during that period he took charge of the group, along with Jorge Pérez, who is currently a researcher at the *Banco de México*,” adds Cortés, who has a doctorate in Economics from the Toulouse School of Economics.

That is how the incubator consolidated itself in 2006. At that time, the Masters students who made up the group proposed an even stiffer challenge: To publish a magazine, which resulted in several print editions and whose final working document, by Juan David Gómez, was published in 2011. After that, it became an online journal.

A new thrust

To continue with their postgraduate studies, the founding professors left the incubator and its leadership passed to other teachers who continued with the job and managed to enroll more than 50 students in the program between 2008 and 2009.

When he took over the reins of the program, Cortés found that a number of changes had occurred, like the fact that the meetings were no longer held on Friday evenings and the curriculum of the course included subjects which dealt with econometric methods and others which arose in the incubator. Thus, novel aspects began to appear, like panels of experts who spoke about monetary policy, education and illegal mining, among other subjects.

In 2010, the Faculty issued a norm whereby young researchers had to participate in incubators, which led some people to regard the group as yet another academic burden and not as a venue for discussion, enrichment and debate.



Juliana Sofía Aragón says she began to get an in-depth understanding of much of what she now works on at the incubator. “When you do research, it entails a systematic effort which will always be useful to you.”



Hence, its members decided to reinvent themselves and face the new challenges. The first: How to capture the interest of the students. “To begin with, an incubator always has a high enrollment of students, but as the semesters of their courses go by, the academic burden leads them to abandon it,” Professor Cortés explains.

The second challenge is how to coordinate the interests of the different participants, since the group originated in the Faculty rather than a particular interest of a professor and that is why it has to achieve a balance between the interests of the students, young researchers and professors.

The third challenge, says Cortés, is to make sure that the content remains novel, that is, different from that of the undergraduate curriculum, and that it strikes the attention of everyone.

At the current time, the group issues an invitation to students who wish to be in the incubator, and on the basis of the group which joins the incubator, the interests they have are defined, a number of working groups devoted to those subjects are formed and the young researchers who are interested in them are selected.

Going beyond an academic approach

In 2017, when they were studying for their Masters, Juliana Sofía Aragón and Germán Pulido coordinated the work of the incubator. Before that, in 2013, when they were undergraduates, they were already part of it. “It was a new stage in the incubator. We worked in thematic groups and the young researchers participated much more. We discussed ideas, read documents and shared what we understood,” Juliana Sofía recalls.

“What most stood out was this inter-generational reciprocity. Some of those students in the incubator became young researchers and those who had been among them took over the coordination of the incubator. It was a very interesting example of one generation replacing the other,” she remarks.

The incubator issues a general invitation to students who wish to join it, and on the basis of the youngsters who are chosen, an assessment of their interests is made and the working groups are defined.



Darwin Cortés Cortés, current director of the group, explains that the incubator has turned into an important driving force in the training and selection of students who might join the “Young Researchers” program.

The three major challenges which the incubator now faces:

- Motivation
- The coordination of interests
- Maintaining a novel content

At the current time, the incubator is made up of 10 Masters students and 20 undergraduate students.

The thematic groups investigate political economy, the economics of gender, econometrics and simulation and macro-economics, among other fields.

Both of them entered the Program of Young Researchers and took over the coordination of the research incubator. Under their leadership, Juli-ana Sofía Aragón and Germán Pulido explain, they worked on three fronts. By means of the groups they sought to guide students towards the subjects which they would potentially like and might further develop as professionals, ones which were not dealt with in depth when they were undergraduates. In the second place, they strengthened the students skills in programming and wrote texts used in an introductory course on programming, which provided the students with the basic tools needed for research work. And the third line built a bridge between the students and the Faculty by inviting guest speakers to talk about a specific subject.

“Much of what I now work on – the fields of the economics of education and health which I am now researching – were part of the subjects which I began to study in depth at the incubator. The way in which I work also derives from there, because when you do research, it entails a systematic effort which will always be useful to you,” Aragón points out.

Like him, other graduates on the Faculty acknowledge that their time in the incubator was invaluable, due to the experience they gained, their training in the research techniques and its leadership. ■



Germán Pulido, who is now a professional, belonged to the incubator in his student days. He recalls that its most outstanding feature was its intergenerational reciprocity. Some of the students at the incubator later became young researchers.