

## Issues and Perspectives

# The University of Buenos Aires' Programa Facultad Abierta: Reflections on a Collaborative and Political–Academic University Extension Initiative with Argentina's Self-Managed Workers

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*This perspectives article offers an overview of the Programa Facultad Abierta (Open Faculty Program) written by its faculty protagonists. Through the creation and continuation of this program the authors describe the evolution of the program that emerged from the socio-political context of Argentina's 2001-2002 economic crisis. As a university extension program associated with the University of Buenos Aires's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, the Programa Facultad Abierta is both socially committed and community-focused. The Programa Facultad Abierta serves as an illustrative case study of the possibilities still available to the public university for not only engaging in continuing adult education, but also for playing a key role in supporting broader proposals for social change against and beyond social exclusion and strictly capitalist prerogatives. Indeed, the experiences of the Programa Facultad Abierta shows that the public university has an important role in an academic–political project which both co-creates knowledge and collaborates with otherwise marginalized communities and working people in forging alternative socio-economic destinies together.*

*Cet article offre un aperçu du Programa Facultad Abierta (Programme d'études libres) écrit par les acteurs clés de la faculté. Les auteurs décrivent l'évolution de ce programme, de sa création découlant du contexte sociopolitique de la crise économique de l'Argentine en 2001-2002 jusqu'à son maintien de nos jours. En tant que programme d'éducation permanente lié à la faculté de philosophie et des lettres de l'Université de Buenos Aires, le Programa Facultad Abierta est à la fois engagé socialement et axé sur la communauté. Il sert de cas d'étude pour illustrer les possibilités qu'ont encore les universités publiques de non seulement s'impliquer dans le maintien de l'éducation des adultes, mais également de jouer un rôle clé dans l'appui des propositions plus larges visant le changement social pour éliminer l'exclusion sociale et les prérogatives strictement capitalistes. Effectivement, les expériences du Programa Facultad Abierta indiquent que l'université publique a un rôle important à jouer dans un projet académique-politique qui contribue à la création des connaissances et collabore avec des communautés marginalisées et des travailleurs pour créer ensemble des destins socioéconomiques alternatifs.*

The Programa Facultad Abierta (Open Faculty Program), a socially and politically committed and community-focused university extension program at the University of Buenos Aires's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, was founded by activist faculty and graduate students in the thick of Argentina's years of deep socio-economic crisis in March 2002.<sup>1</sup> Since then, we have been actively engaged in the struggle for social justice in Argentina. We chose early on to accompany and research the country's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (ERTs, worker-recuperated enterprises)—a movement that has included the takeover and conversion of over 400 troubled firms into worker cooperatives by close to 16,000 workers as promising alternatives to the social ills wrought by neoliberal crises (Ruggeri & Vieta, 2015; Vieta, forthcoming).<sup>2</sup> Over our 15-year history, the Programa has managed to extend the university out into the community and situate itself firmly in the national political discourse in ways that reach far beyond what its material resources and institutional position might suggest.

Our broad mandate in the Programa is to strengthen a solidarity relationship between the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires (UBA)—Argentina's largest public university—and the country's burgeoning popular organizations and social movements. Early on we decided to focus our energies in accompanying the ERT movement by conducting surveys and mapping its extent and dimensions, assisting ERT workers in consolidating their worker cooperatives, and supporting them when lobbying the state for subsidies, legislation, and policies more sensitive to their plight. Despite the challenges we have faced over the years, the Programa has exemplified how the public university can support a growing social movement while continuing to develop an extension practice in response to the needs of students and the community.

Taking a cue from the self-managed workers we collaborate with, the Programa's initiatives are organized via participatory working groups consisting of students, faculty, and social movement protagonists. This is one of the most noticeable ways that our extension program differentiates itself from usual university research and extension practices. We have witnessed an impressive number of students participate in our outreach initiatives and courses and the Programa has earned national and worldwide recognition in social movement circles, the public sector, and the academy. The following is a select example of some of our achievements since our start in 2002:

- Spearheading four exhaustive surveys of the ERT movement in Argentina (2002, 2004, 2009/2010, and 2014), as well as three additional surveys (one regional and two issues-based).<sup>3</sup>
- Supporting a large number of worker-recuperated enterprises and their umbrella organizations, including accompanying and assisting the struggles of the worker-recuperated Hotel BAUEN in their ongoing fight to attain the expropriation of the cooperative,<sup>4</sup> and helping to convert various troubled firms into worker cooperatives over the years.
- Creating, curating, and continuing to oversee the Centro de Documentación de las Empresas Recuperadas (ERT Documentation Centre), permanently operating in the worker-recuperated Artes Gráficas Chilavert cooperative.
- Initiating the Latin American ERT Guide, with interactive information on ERT cooperatives from Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil and Venezuela.
- Collaboratively writing and publishing a series of educational handbooks on cooperatives

and self-management for ERTs and other self-managed organizations.

- Collaborating in the founding of the Callao Cultural Cooperative and the Biblioteca de la Economía de los Trabajadores (Workers' Economy Library), where, through our partnership with the Buenos Aires publishing houses Peña Lillo and Ediciones Continente, we have published over 20 books on the ERT phenomenon, workers' self-management, political economy, and labour issues.<sup>5</sup>
- Producing and editing three documentary films on ERTs under the series title "Social Innovations in the Context of Exclusion: The Case of Worker-Recuperated Enterprises", which includes: *The Case of the BAUEN Cooperative*, *The Case of the Chilavert Cooperative*, and *The Case of the 19 de Diciembre Cooperative*.
- Designing and continuing to teach a capstone seminar for the degree programs in Anthropology, History, and Geography entitled "Worker-Recuperated Enterprises and Self-Managed Workers in Argentina and Latin America," led since 2009 by Programa Facultad Abierta director Andrés Ruggeri.
- Founding and continuing as lead organizer of the "International Gathering of the Workers' Economy" conferences (recently concluding its sixth international edition at the worker-recuperated cooperatives Hotel BAUEN and Textiles Pigüé<sup>6</sup>). Since 2007, the conference has brought together various academic institutions, researchers, teachers, social and political activists, unions, workers, and workers' organizations from more than 30 countries throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

### **The Development of the Programa Facultad Abierta and Its Accompaniment of Workers' Self-Management Initiatives**

One of the most important activities we have led over the years has been mapping the ERT phenomenon. So far, this has included four national surveys of ERTs carried out in 2002, 2004, 2009/2010, and 2014; a survey of ERTs in the city of Buenos Aires in 2007, which we undertook with the Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Industrial (INTI, National Institute of Industrial Technology); and two focused surveys in 2016 and 2017 assessing the ERT movement in light of the new neoliberal policies of President Mauricio Macri (2015-present). Our in-depth and longitudinal tracking of the ERT phenomenon over time has allowed us to build a uniquely detailed and nuanced database which is to date the largest and most accurate dataset of ERTs in Argentina.

These studies have served as the basis for the creation of the Centro de Documentación de las Empresas Recuperadas (ERT Documentation Centre), a joint venture between the Programa Facultad Abierta and the worker-recuperated Artes Gráficas Chilavert cooperative. Together with our surveys, the growing archive of materials collected and available at the ERT Documentation Centre has permitted us to closely evaluate the situation and needs of the ERT movement. Because of this, our work has been cited in scholarly articles, books, and journalistic reports from around the world, and has also been used by various government ministries, agencies, and transnational institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), Argentina's Ministries of Labour and Social Development, the Ministries of Labor of Uruguay and Venezuela, and the Secretary of Labor of the Government of Mexico City. The Programa has also embraced a collaborative practice with teams from other UBA faculties and other

universities in order to support the capacity building and consolidation of ERTs and worker cooperatives on aspects of their internal management, community development initiatives, and technological renewal.

All of the activities that we have initiated over the years have always included the participation of student volunteers who actively take part in our work with ERTs and the community. The undergraduate students who volunteer with us, in turn, receive credit towards graduation. This focus on service education has given our students rich experiences in fieldwork and community-focused activism while allowing them to learn extra-curricular skills and professional training. In many cases, our students have managed to tailor these experiences into careers in community development, public service, policy design and implementation, as well as in fields related to social justice, critical pedagogy and education.

To date, the ERT Documentation Centre is among our proudest achievements. Crucially, we have managed to keep the Documentation Centre open and freely accessible to the public. Rather than have the Centre cloistered within the academy, it has been imperative for us that it remain accessible to workers in particular. Its presence in the facilities of the worker-recuperated Artes Gráficas Chilavert cooperative is thus not coincidental and was a strategic decision we made together with the Chilavert workers. Opening its doors formally on October 20, 2006, over the years the ERT Documentation Centre has been used by countless students, researchers, and workers from Argentina and throughout the world.

Perhaps more than any other initiative of the Programa, the ERT Documentation Centre articulates the tight links we have managed to forge between the university, the community, and movements for social justice and change. This nexus, we argue, should continue to be an endeavour that originates from within the public university. For us, the ERT Documentation Centre manifests the clear reciprocal relationship and accessibility that we are convinced should explicitly exist between the publically funded university and the communities that sustain it and that share common educational and developmental interests. Here, the public university literally shares space with workers, collaboratively partaking in the Documentation Centre's day-to-day running, crosslinking workers' experiences with academic and broader socio-political interests, and continuing to build a relationship of trust and mutual aid between the academy and workers that has helped to consolidate both our extension work and the ERT movement. Etched into the Programa Facultad Abierta's very name, we feel that articulating this open relationship is important both for mobilizing collaboratively created knowledge and for community-based training and capacity building. In this spirit, the archives housed at the Documentation Centre located in an ERT affords researchers and the community open access to relevant data on one of Argentina's most vibrant labour movements while supporting the very recuperation of workers' own history and memory of their struggles and achievements.

### **Some Reflections on University Extension from Our Experience**

While we are proud of our many achievements, we have faced challenges. Two main and related challenges have followed our existence since we started 15 years ago. Our first overarching challenge is linked to our fragile political situation within the Argentine public university system, which is pockmarked by the same political turmoil and conflicts that characterize Argentina's broader political economy. While the proposal that laid out the initial vision of the Programa Facultad Abierta was approved by a resolution of the board of directors of the University Extension Secretariate of UBA's Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, over the years we

have had to continually justify our existence. The appointments of the Programa's coordinators and director, for instance, is not secure and must be renewed every year, which entails the submission of an annual report and work plan. This reality has meant that the Programa has been vulnerable to the political swings and institutional priorities of the university's administrators.

A second related challenge is linked to a paucity of resources. University extension programs in Argentina, as in other parts of the world, do not usually have access to guaranteed funds. The situation of the Programa is no exception and is perhaps complicated by our commitment to the social movements we work with, often placing us in tension with the political and ideological commitments of the university administrators and local and national governments of the moment. One of the ways that political opposition to our initiative has manifested itself over the years, for example, has been the withholding of funds to the Programa by university administrators under the premise that the university is experiencing financial difficulties, or that academic priorities have shifted. We believe we have, however, managed to survive and continue to thrive despite these periods of institutional opposition because of the legitimacy we have earned within and beyond the university. We are convinced that this broader social legitimacy we enjoy is due to the continued quality of our research and teaching, the widespread recognition that our work has garnered in Argentina and internationally, and, in no small part, to the ongoing participation of social movements, community groups, and students in our initiatives. Thus, while, with only three permanent staff members, our organizational structure remains small and our resources limited, we have managed to not only survive, but also effectively fulfil our mission despite our economic and institutional situation.

If we were asked to concisely summarize our approach to university extension in one sentence it would be this: The Programa Facultad Abierta is anchored to an academic-political vision of the role of the public university with respect to the community, popular sectors, and movements for social change. Perhaps we are stating the obvious when we say this. Nevertheless, it is important, we feel, to conclude this brief summary of who we are and what we do by clearly articulating this political-academic vision that we have chosen for the Programa.

As a program of the public university that operates both within and outside its institutional boundaries, we recognize that there are a plethora of perspectives concerning how the academy should work with the community. We have explicitly chosen not to juxtapose community activism or political militancy with the "normal" tasks that take place in the academy. For us, then, to embrace an academic-political approach to what we do from the public university means to fundamentally put into play a political conception of the role of the public university in its relationship with social organizations and popular struggles for social change. Most crucially for us, it means to struggle from within the public university and the broader academy in order to continue to articulate clearly the necessity for policies that uphold and preserve university extension, which is a struggle situated deeply in the debates concerning how the public university should always be in the service of the very people that sustain it. Thus, an academic-political approach to our extension program means that we need to be at the service of the social sectors that are most invested in envisioning and struggling for a different, more inclusive, national project that includes a vibrant public university. We are not, of course, the only ones who maintain that the public university should have community service or political commitments as priorities, but we are clearly a minority in the current political context of Argentina and the administrative hierarchies of the UBA.

We have thus chosen to focus our academic-political energies as a university extension

program in supporting and accompanying Argentina's workers' struggles in a disposition grounded in solidarity. This means that we strive to respect the spaces, experiences, and objectives of the workers we accompany without imposing our theories or ideas onto their realities. Rather than educating to, we work with them to co-articulate and co-construct knowledge and understanding in a way that reinforces and contributes to the growth of the workers' organizations we collaborate with. In our work with Argentina's ERTs, this means that we endeavour to contribute to the consolidation of cooperatives as self-managed initiatives and as spaces of possibility for the creation of an economy rooted in the needs of workers' first and foremost—what we have learned to call “the workers' economy.” There is thus another related and fundamental political criterion that centres our work as an extension program: Respect for workers' own experiences in the construction of their organizations and the conviction that our role is to contribute, critically yet in solidarity, to this construction without taking advantage of the situation for our own ends, without dominating the dialogue, and certainly without taking the role of leaders or vanguards.

One of the most important things we have learned from our university extension work over the past 15 years is the strategic importance of opening spaces for debate, dialogue, and the exchange of experiences and ideas between academic sectors committed to the struggles of workers and workers' organizations. This, for us, is an instance where the concept of extension takes on its fuller meaning. Our task, then, as practitioners of an academic–political project of university extension is not only to support the actions of workers, but also to contribute to the creation of spaces that allow them, as well as us and other groups interested in social change, to critically reflect on practices of producing social wealth differently, as prefigured by workers' self-management. We have endeavoured to foster this critical reflection by co-creating open spaces—such as the ERT Documentation Centre and the International Gatherings of the Workers' Economy—for coming together to share experiences between the academy and the world of work, which we recognize as the key site of struggle where the contradictions of our status-quo economic and political system are played out. We believe that these open spaces can facilitate the co-production of new concepts that can begin to elaborate new theoretical vantage points and practical criteria in the struggle for carving out new, more just ways of organizing socio-economic life. It is thus not by chance that we have chosen to do this with self-managed workers—as a part of the working class—and that we have been seeking to broaden the reach of the Programa Facultad Abierta to other unionized and precarious workers in recent years.

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## Notes

1 See: <http://www.recuperadasdoc.com.ar/index.html>.

2 Argentina's ERTs emerge from capitalist firms in trouble that are taken over and converted to worker cooperatives by former employees. They first came onto the scene as workers' bottom-up responses to the crises of the country's neoliberal model beginning in the mid-1990s, hitting their apex during the years leading up to and just after the "Argentine December" of 2001. Hamstrung by an austere form of neoliberalism that saw business bankruptcy and unemployment rates soar to unprecedented levels during these years, more and more workers from a broad cross-section of Argentina's urban-based economy and across the national territory occupied and began to self-manage their places of employment. Argentina's ERTs have proven to be viable solutions by workers themselves to macro- and micro-economic crises, austerity-driven anti-labour policies, antagonistic state institutions, and, most fundamentally, alienated labour.

3 See, for instance: Programa Facultad Abierta (2002), Ruggeri (2016), Ruggeri, Martínez, & Tincherro (2005), Ruggeri, Polti, Clark, Antivero, Delegdisch, et al. (2010), Ruggeri, Antivero, Elena, Polti, et al. (2014).

4 After forming a worker cooperative and securing the temporary control of the plant under usufruct from the presiding bankruptcy judges, Argentina's ERT worker-protagonists may lobby for the expropriation of the firm by the state on behalf of the cooperative as a "common good." For more on the use of expropriation law in Argentina for securing firms that have been converted to worker cooperatives for its workers, see: Ruggeri & Vieta (2015), Vieta (forthcoming).

5 For a list of the Programa Facultad Abierta's publications, see:

<http://www.recuperadasdoc.com.ar/propias.html> and <http://www.recuperadasdoc.com.ar/index.html#>.

6 See: <https://laeconomíadelostrabajadores.wordpress.com/>.

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