

WIXARIKA

HUICHOL SCHOLARSHIP FUND (HSF) NEWSLETTER – SPRING 2022



Huichol Scholarship Fund recipient, Maria Fernanda Ramirez Gamboa, with a sign that says, “Neither the land nor women are territories to be conquered.”

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***** *Please share this newsletter with others* *****

HUICHOL SCHOLARSHIP FUND (HSF)

The HSF is a charity that assists Huichol (Wixárika) youth to acquire university level skills and education as a way of supporting efforts by their communities and nation (located throughout the Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango and Zacatecas) to defend and strengthen their cultural and political autonomy.

*Launched in 2018-2019, and now completing its fourth year of operation, the HSF relies on donations from Americans and Canadians, many residing in Mexico, to support about twenty university students per year via scholarships. **You can donate here:***

<https://www.wixarika.org/donate> (Remember to specify your donation is for the scholarship fund in the space for 'special instructions to the vendor.')

Operating under the umbrella of the Wixárika Research Center (WRC), the HSF is run by its co-founders, Diana Negrin and Brian McDougall, with assistance from our parent organization: the WRC. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the volunteers who assist in administering the program and its fundraising activities, including Yvonne Negrin, Maria Cruz, Jimena Marquez, Manuel Lopez Delgado, Art Fumerton, Kristal Ruiz, and Dan Grippo.

In addition to supporting the HSF, we encourage you to learn more about and support the three organizations that have nurtured and supported this scholarship program from the start:

- *Wixárika Research Center: <https://wixarika.org/>*
- *International Friendship Club: <https://ifcvallarta.org/>*
- *Volcanes Community Education Project/Niños de Roma AC: <https://volcanesproject.com/>*

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[1] What our 2021-22 students told us about their university experience

Each spring, we poll Huichol Scholarship Fund (HSF) students to learn about their experience and to determine what, if any, changes we might need to make the program.

Our 2021-22 annual survey of HSF recipients, with responses from 13 students (8 males and 5 females), tells us a great deal about their academic challenges, accomplishments, and hopes for the future. We are delighted to share some of the highlights with you.

How they used their scholarship awards

Each student spent their \$7000 (pesos) scholarship award in different ways, with most reporting expenditures in four or five different categories. One of the most common expenditures (10 students) was for tuition or other academic fees. While many Mexican universities are public, and have no tuition, they often impose various fees, which can be a major barrier for poor Indigenous students.

The other commonly reported expenditure (10 students) was for transportation. Because HSF students commute between their home communities and the cities where they attend university, transportation costs are often substantial. Research has consistently shown that periodic travel home is important for the mental health of Indigenous students. Reconnecting with family and community builds resilience for students attending university in what is essentially a foreign language and culture, where they often face discrimination.

Other expenditures reported by our students included food (7), internet (5), school supplies (5), books (4), and rent (3). A big change from the past two years is a reduction in the number of students using their scholarships to purchase electronic equipment, cellphones, and internet service to support pandemic-driven online learning. As universities resume in-person classes, student spending on those things seems to have been reduced.

HSF students often report using their scholarships for needs we might not expect. For example, one student used part of the award to buy new glasses, which made study easier. Another had to purchase specialized software required by her program. Four students used their awards to purchase uniforms and clothing required by their academic programs (e.g., laboratory clothing). One student reported spending HSF money to support younger siblings.

Pandemic learning: added costs and new pressures

Several students told us about added costs associated with pandemic learning, including expenses for masking, hand sanitizer, and other safety measures. One person explained that because normal transit to campus (via minibuses) was crowded and unsafe, she sometimes spent money to take a cab to school.

We know from past surveys, that some students support themselves through university by making and selling handicrafts. This year, several HSF recipients told us the pandemic had

either reduced or eliminated their income from handicraft production. That made them even more dependent upon their HSF award than in previous years.

Responding to reports of increased student costs during the 2020-21 academic year, we raised the value of the HSF award from \$6000 pesos to \$7000. That decision was also a response to our belief the pandemic had also reduced student opportunities for part-time work. This year's student feedback about reduced income from handicraft production confirms the wisdom of that decision. (The scholarship awards will remain at \$7000 pesos in the future.)

The pandemic had a significant social and psychological impact on HSF recipients. Several students reported difficulties shifting between in-person and online learning. For example, one person said her initial problems adjusting from in-person to online classes were compounded when she later had to switch back to in-person learning. Suffering from a diminished capacity to concentrate, and dropping grades, she sought assistance from a psychologist, to make the adjustment, and re-build her confidence in public speaking. Another student commented on the same issue:

Face-to-face is a challenge nowadays, because I spent four semesters online, getting used to... ways of working through electronic media. [Now]...returning to face-to-face involves new challenges and new ways of relating.

Sadly, pandemic-related deaths also affected our students. One person had to deal not only with the death of her mother from Covid, but also the financial debts she and her family incurred in the unsuccessful attempt to keep her mother alive. Similarly, another student talked about the anxiety and depression caused by the Covid-related death of someone close to her, which made it more difficult for her to concentrate on academic work.

I attended therapy for five months... I feel happy to have concluded my treatment. I feel calmer with myself since I had anxiety and an unfinished grief that didn't allow me to get on with life.

How the HSF award supported students' ability to pursue their studies

As in previous years, quite a few students told us the HSF award reduced the financial stress that might otherwise have undermined their studies. University students from poor Indigenous families often spend so much time in part-time employment that their academic work suffers. Study time gets reduced, assignments don't get completed, or are inadequately prepared. Speaking for many of the students, one person said the HSF scholarship "was a great support. ...I was able to concentrate on my studies and reduce my work time." Others echoed that sentiment, saying the following:

The scholarship helped me focus a lot on my studies, because I stopped worrying and stressing about getting a job to pay the rent...

Being a recipient...helped me a great deal, because...due to the pandemic, it was difficult to find a job...for university expenses. I am very grateful for the scholarship, which allowed me to continue my studies...

Several students mentioned the HSF scholarship helped compensate for the absence or reduction in financial assistance from family members. For one student, who is a single parent, the award proved vital to her financial survival and ability to continue studying. For another, the scholarship made the difference between persisting with his studies and dropping out:

[The scholarship] ...supported me in continuing my studies. I reached a point where I thought about dropping out because my family could no longer support me financially and I thought about leaving school.... But thanks to the HSF...I can focus on my studies...

Several students mentioned how motivating it was for them to receive the scholarship, something we've heard from HSF students in previous years.

[The HSF award] ...motivated me to maintain a good average...[and] to demonstrate there are students of Wixárika origin who have the same abilities as mestizo students.

Accomplishments and challenges in the past year

We asked students about their greatest challenges and accomplishments during the past year. Given the many obstacles Indigenous students face qualifying for and completing a university program, we were not surprised that several students pointed to their persistence as their main accomplishment:

I think my greatest achievement was...continuing my studies despite the pandemic, because it made many of my classmates chose to leave the university. ...I am proud of not dropping out despite pandemic conditions like lack of connectivity or not enough money to pay for connectivity.

Other students mentioned very specific accomplishments. One person talked about giving a workshop on the Wixárika language. Another wrote about the opportunity to conduct scientific research at the University of Michoacan. Working in a telesecundarias school with non-Indigenous students was a big confidence builder for a third student.

One HSF recipient student talked about the satisfaction from working at the high school in her home community. She assisted the school by teaching, working with students preparing for their university entrance exams, and helping to manage construction of a new school building.

It is a great experience. Working with the students is priceless... ...the fact they see me as an inspiration to keep studying is really satisfying; it motivates me to give the best of myself.

Some of the challenges our students faced during the past year were similar to those identified in the past. The difficulty of juggling study and part-time work was mentioned a few times. One student talked about being able to avoid "flunking out." Another expressed a degree of anxiety about the future, not knowing what to expect when she graduates.

But some challenges identified by HSF students were pandemic related.

One of my biggest challenges was to finish my online classes.... Sometimes I had problems with my network connection.

Plans for future involvement in their home communities

Supporters and donors to the HSF know our admission process favors students with a commitment to community involvement. So, it is no surprise that when asked about their future plans with regards to their communities, our students often have quite specific ideas. For example, one person explained that recent work experience at a law firm helped her realize how she might be able to assist her hometown, and other Wixárika communities, with long-standing land disputes.

Often, HSF students attending university outside their home communities, become aware of services available to urban residents, but lacking back home. One HSF recipient told us she plans to work on ensuring her home community can provide mental health services available outside Wixárika territory. Another has a related commitment: providing greater health services related to nutritional issues. Aware she still needs to learn more, that student told us she plans to stay in the city after graduation, “to prepare myself more... to learn skills that can help me later in the plans I have for my community.” An agribusiness student wants to strengthen the local economy by advising farmers about strategies for growing vegetables that can be sold in nearby towns.

Because HSF recipients are doing something unusual by attending university, they are conscious of their status as role models for Wixárika youth. Simply by returning to their communities, they can have a significant impact. One student said this: “There is no female engineer in my community. I plan to serve as an example.” Another said,

I am really excited, because I am achieving one of my biggest dreams, which is to finish my degree and graduate. I want to motivate young people to continue studying.

A third HSF recipient put his commitment this way:

I would like to be able to return to the community and continue fostering a culture of empowerment...in the present and future generations.”

Quite a few of our current scholarship students mentioned the importance of giving back to their community via the educational system.

Right now, through my participation in my community, specifically at the Tamaatsi Paritsika high school...I feel I am giving back a little bit of what my community has given me. ...My plans...are to return and teach in the new facilities (now under construction) and be able to tell my students that I collaborated in the construction of the school....

[I want] ...to earn my place in the Jalisco education system, specifically in telesecunderia, to continue my preparation with a master’s degree... I also want to work alongside the leaders of the Tuxpan de Bolanos self-determination commission to seek the improvement of Indigenous education.... I feel committed to my peers, because not all of them have the same opportunities as me.

HSF students understand the lack of opportunity for Indigenous people in small and isolated communities. One of them explained she wants to ensure people in Wixárika communities have

a better life, with greater access to education, health and social services. Focusing on education, she said the following:

I would like to start a project to construct a high school in my community. ...I feel I have the ability to make it a reality and assist the people who helped me grow up and educate me about the need to serve and support my community.

What students want you to know

Finally, we asked the 2021-22 HSF award recipients what messages they had for you, the people who support and donate to the program. Echoing what we heard in previous years, the young men and women in the HSF program expressed deep gratitude. This comment is typical:

To all the people who donated money, thank you very much. I am very grateful for the great support you have given us, so that we can continue studying, I really value this scholarship, I send you my best wishes and I hope that someday I can meet you and thank you personally.

HSF recipients know their scholarships have given them an opportunity unavailable to most of their peers. Not unusual was the following comment:

Being part of an Indigenous community there are many...traditions that limit women. I have five sisters and none of them have a career or more than a high school education. All of them are mothers. Being the youngest, I had to struggle a lot to be here at university, about to graduate. ...thanks to this scholarship...I was able to do it all. I want to be an inspiration for my nieces and nephews. I want the women in my community to know that they can be more than wives and mothers. I thank you for your support and I promise to keep working three times harder to be worthy of this scholarship.

Other students said the following:

...thanks to you, young people like me from Wixárika communities that are far away from the big cities have been able to get ahead. ...in the past, it was unheard of for young people from Indigenous communities to graduate with a degree... in my case, I am the first in my community to graduate with a degree in accounting. And I am eternally grateful, because without you we would not be able to graduate; ...I did not graduate alone; it is not only my achievement but also yours...

Many thanks, from a Wixárika woman and mother... Nobody gives us money without expecting to profit. You have been the exception. When I feel sad, discouraged, I think that there were people who trusted in my ability without knowing me and are contributing to my professional development. That makes me feel the hours I invested in my studies have been worthwhile. I have no more words than those of gratitude for the support provided. And know that my mother is the main person who thanks you for your support. Every time I get the HSF award, she indicates how impressed she is that you give me a scholarship just for being me....

[2] Five more HSF recipients complete their programs

During the current academic year, five students completed their programs:

- Prudencio Rivera Carrillo (Education, December 2021)
- Silverio de la Rosa Muñoz (Nursing, February 2022)
- Cristian Rey Pacheco (Agrobusiness, May 2022)
- Beatriz Ramírez (Psychology, June 2022)
- María Fernanda Ramírez Gamboa (Biomedical Engineering, June 2022)

We are very proud to acknowledge their achievement and look forward to additional graduates soon.

With these five, the number of Huichol/Wixárika university students to have completed their studies with HSF financial assistance is now fourteen.

[3] HSF's 2022 online meetings: video recordings available

During the winter, the HSF hosted three information events for supporters and donors. The first was a talk on Wixárika culture by anthropologist and HSF volunteer Jimena Márquez (Mexico/Canada). Second, Manuel López Delgado, a Rarámuri (Indigenous) Professor of education in Ciudad Juárez, gave a talk about the experience of indigenous students in Mexico's university system.

Our final talk featured two current scholarship recipients, Zulema de la Cruz (pictured here) and Alejandro Cosío, talking about their experience as indigenous university students.

Don't worry if you missed one of these sessions. All three were recorded and can be viewed on the Wixárika Research Center YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1OC5ipNBohb7RKUoomb6VQ>



[4] What some of our donors said about the HSF

Recently, we asked some of our donors why they support the HSF, and what message they would like to share with the Wixárika university students supported by their generosity. Here are a few replies.

Why have you chosen to support the Huichol Scholarship Fund financially?

We are purchasing a place in PV to stay a few months a year. Wherever we have lived, we wanted to become part of, and give back to, the community. There are plenty of worthy causes in the area, but we became aware of the Huichol Scholarship Fund through the International Friendship Club. Our overall giving is biased toward education so this seemed a good fit. We also feel strongly about helping underserved communities.

I choose to join others who donate to this effort because I believe education is a powerful force, beneficial for any individual and any society, ultimately the entire community of the earth. As a highly privileged person, I feel called to help those who are disadvantaged by my privilege. It is just a deep call to justice and equality. Plus, I am so inspired by the efforts of Brian and others who are giving so much more of themselves than a small amount of money. I want to encourage them in their noble dedication.

What would you like to tell Huichol Scholarship Fund students about the reasons why you support their education?

Simply that society will benefit from their success.

You are heroes in my eyes, you are the hope and potential of a better world with more understanding and justice and goodness than previous generations have known. You should be so proud of yourselves for the courage and energy you are using to forge a new path for your people. It's a privilege for me to support you in the small way I can, to feel that I am doing something good for young people who are challenging themselves to do the hard work of making beneficial change in the world!

[5] The HSF at recent Wixárika community meetings

In October 2021, Diana Negrín attended the Tuapurie General Assembly to present the work the Wixárika Research Center has been doing. This included talking about the HSF program, which community members were very supportive of. Since then, Diana has continued to receive inquiries from teachers, parents, and students interested in the scholarship program, even if some of the latter group are not yet eligible to apply. Other community authorities have also responded positively to the HSF, making it clear there is a large and growing interest in post-secondary education, and a need to find ways to support Wixárika university students.

[6] News from the Wixárika (Huichol) nation

This past March 18 and 19, there was a very important "Renewal of World" ritual on the sacred land of Wirikuta (in the northwest area of traditional Wixárika territory) to mark the tenth anniversary of the conflict with First Majestic Silver, a Canadian mining company. Several HSF students, as well as Diana Negrin, participated in this important event.

Also, on the 25th of April, 200 people began a caravan from the Wixárika homeland to Mexico City, walking more than 1000 km on foot, to see the Mexican President and demand land restitutions. (Although the Wixárika won their court cases to get return of their lands, the legal rulings were not implemented by authorities.)



This spring has therefore been marked by Wixárika mobilization, and HSF students have been part of these movements. We are proud of their involvement. They are the future of Wixárika communities. With the same determination they demonstrated in completing their studies, they will undoubtedly be among the leaders of tomorrow for the Wixárika people.

Further details about these recent events can be found in the spring 2022 Newsletter of the Wixárika Research Center (WRC): <https://www.wixarika.org/our-newsletters>. To keep abreast of key events in Wixárika territory, make sure to check the news page of the WRC website regularly: <https://www.wixarika.org/news>.

[7] The HSF's new online scholarship application process

The WRC has continued to upgrade its online presence, which includes an expanded section about our scholarship program and its recipients. As part of this work, we have streamlined the yearly scholarship application process, creating an online form that simplifies the process for students and reduces the work for our HSF review committee. Now, students who apply can upload documents and fill out the application questionnaire directly onto our website.

[8] The HSF's current financial picture

As this newsletter is being completed, the HSF appears to be in healthy financial shape.

During the just completed 2021-22 academic year, the HSF spent a little over \$140,000 pesos on scholarships. With many of our 21 students still having one or more years of study ahead of them, the program already has a large financial commitment to current students who will be continuing their studies during the next two academic years.

For the upcoming 2022-23 academic year, we anticipate spending about the same amount as in 2021-22. With a current bank balance of about \$225,000, enough to make a new round of scholarships in September, it may seem the HSF's financial needs are diminished. But, as we all know, appearances can be misleading.

Our 2021-22 income was skewed by a one-time only donation of \$3000 US, our single largest donation ever. It came from a trust fund that has now closed. Remove the roughly \$60,000

pesos that donation gave us from our current bank account of \$225,000 and you get a more accurate indication of the narrow margin between the amount of money we normally raise (about \$165,000 pesos) and the amount we spend (about \$140,000 pesos).

We operate very close to the line, even though we currently have no expenses other than bank charges and scholarships. (The HSF is administered by volunteer labour.) Exceptional donations aside, the HSF's expenditures are only slightly less (roughly \$25,000 pesos) than the amount you give us each year. **So, your donations, and those of new people, remain vital to the continued operation of the HSF.**

Please continue to support us as you have in the past. Tell others about the work we do. Consider switching from one-time donations to smaller, but regular monthly donations that help us to plan and maintain a sustainable scholarship program. (Three of our donors have already done that.) **You can do that here:** <https://www.wixarika.org/donate>. Please remember to indicate in the message to vendor box that the funds are for the scholarship program.

If you have connections with corporations, governments or other institutions that might be convinced to support the HSF, please work with us to help make that happen. We currently have only one institutional donor, the International Friendship Club in Puerto Vallarta. We would like to have more.