

VIACIRCO: Montreal, Rio de Janeiro, London, and the World



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Project Overview

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 Organization: Crescer e Viver
 Location: Brazil
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About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations over a period of 2 to 3 months. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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It had always been my dream to see the creation of an exchange program among circus schools in Latin America. This project is the union of my different interests surrounding the art of circus. Part of it grew out of a need I saw while performing and teaching circus arts in Latin America. The idea continued to develop for me as I spent the last five years pursuing an academic interest in the study of circus through the field of Latin American studies, which has reinforced and proven to me the positive influence that circus learning can have on all aspects of health in individuals and communities. It was thanks to Professor José Jouve-Martin that I was able to study in depth social circus in Mexico during an independent study, and then an honors thesis project that he supervised on social circus in Brazil. I found that many aid programs provide basic health care services to communities in need, which can be a valuable investment. There are few programs, however, that offer physical fitness opportunities, and education supportive of a healthy life and healthy relationships. Circus schools teach the importance of physical, mental, and emotional health. Many schools reach out to communities in need, which have limited services and low social mobility. Schools that address the whole person's needs, help them and the country they live in move towards the solidification of a balanced society, rather than one dependent on foreign donations and charity. An ideal would be to support projects that are initiated by the community in response to a clearly felt need to ensure the project's relevance and potential results. While locally developed projects like Crescer e Viver (CeV) have the benefit of great support within the community, they are often in need of outside funding for the continuation of programs, let alone expansion. Therefore, the services they offer are limited in range, but there is a great potential for growth to be able to reach more people in need.

Rationale

While circus schools provide educational and training opportunities for young people to train in technique for employment in the circus, these schools cannot provide the life training necessary for living life in the circus, such as resilience, and the ability to travel and adapt to different places, lifestyles and languages. In academic exchanges such as the successful Erasmus program for student mobility, the aim is "to boost skills and employability"ⁱ and "provide foreign exchange options for students..."ⁱⁱ These programs show measurable results and have helped many students along their career paths. The success of programs like these combined with the need for an exchange program expressed by circus school directors, demonstrates an obvious opportunity, but the challenge lies in how to go about the development and creation of such a program. Enabling circus students to travel helps them as individuals, and in addition also brings their

knowledge and experience into the areas to which they travel. Without outside funding, however, most students will never have such an opportunity. This is an issue related directly to the Crescer e Viver Circus School, but also to all of Latin and Iberoamerica.

The objective of my 2014 McBurney Fellowships was threefold:

1. To get to know the organization Crescer e Viver by teaching and helping with day-to-day activities to understand how they successfully do the work that they do.
2. To find the best way to involve a Crescer e Viver in creating a permanent exchange program within the Iberoamerican countries.
3. To record and document the activities and lessons of the experience, in order to add a study to the body of research conducted in academic studies of circus.

In order to do this, I spent three months in Rio de Janeiro working with Crescer e Viver, teaching in their social programs, and recording observations. At the end I had a project proposal written for the implementation of an Iberoamerican circus exchange program. Though I faced the usual challenges of being an outside observer attempting to gain useful insight into a well-established community, I hope the results are useful to the school, the community, and the future students who will benefit from an exchange program. Fulfilling this dream, even to this stage, would not have been possible without the help of the McBurney Fellowship, and even more so, the generous welcome of the students, teachers, and administrators at Crescer e Viver.

Crescer e Viver; What I Knew and What I Know

The reason I chose to travel to Brazil was because both the country and the organization of Crescer e Viver are exemplary. Brazil's history of colonization, slavery, and decolonization is unique as most histories are, but being the last Latin American country to abolish slavery, the wounds are fresh and apparent. The poverty gap in Brazil is one of the largest in Latin America and social mobility is difficult. On top of that, 2014 and 2016 are bringing two of the largest global events to Brazil -- the World Cup and the Olympic games. While ideally this global attention and investment would bring positive change to the country, it is likely that the increase in cost of living and the "renovations" done to the city will actually only help wealthy citizens and foreigners. Public Transit has risen in cost causing many violent protests and average rent has increased dramatically.

Crescer e Viver was started in 2000 as part of the samba school *Porto da Pedra* after the 10th anniversary of Federal Law 8069, a statute for the protection of children and adolescents. A building that had previously only been used for carnival activities was transformed into a school for the arts including dance, percussion, music, capoeira, and judo.ⁱⁱⁱ I learned from being there that the current directors are still the same people who came out of the community and who have been involved since the beginning. They have dedicated their lives to the project, often sacrificing personal time, funds, and more. It is obvious that despite constant challenges in funding, projects like this would not exist if it weren't for the dedication, connections and hard work of the administrators involved. Life in the circus is not easy.

I went to Crescer e Viver because of its success story, and I also knew that the school has become a hub of circus exchanges and had experimented with hosting students from Peru, Spain and Chile. I did not know, however, that the circus is located in Cidade Nova, blocks from the famous Sambodromo, a very poor neighborhood rife with violence and drug activity. Furthermore, I did not know that through the process of preparation for the world cup, poor people in the neighborhood were being removed, displacing and entire families separated to State-built housing in locations far from the center of the city that are already overcrowded and insufficient. Children who were moved were no longer able to attend circus activities, as they could not afford the time and money it would take to get there. These are challenges that CeV is currently facing that make maintaining programming even more difficult.

There were also some good discoveries to be made. Co-founder of Crescer e Viver Junior Perim, it turns out, is head of the Federação Iberoamericano de Circo (FIC) which currently includes directors of circus schools in seven countries including Brazil, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Spain and Portugal. FIC has now implemented a series of two performance exchanges that took place during the first and second International Circus Festival in Brazil. I only found out about it when I arrived in Rio because the federation is so new that they don't have a website. This progress, however, would greatly benefit the momentum of my project.

The exchange program CRECE-Sur was created under the direction of La Escuela de Circo Carampa in Madrid to bring together the students in circus schools in Iberoamerica. For five years Donald Lehn, the director of La Carampa in Spain, has been running CRECE, a creation workshop in collaboration with a local theatre in Madrid, and saw this opportunity to create international exchange. CRECE-Sur highlights the work of a professional director, giving students real-life performance experience. They travel to Brazil, put together a show for 3 weeks, and perform during the festival for six days. This program is a great start to begin showing the students what it will take to perform professionally once they get a job. The festival takes 14 students every two years. This year's invitation publication states that "bringing together artists and creators offers a space for the exchange of experiences, investigation, to play with the idea of discovering new forms...of looking for synergies, but above the objective of making a commercial product is more the arrival at an artistic quality, which will drive the creative process.^{iv} CRECE-Sur helps teach students to collaborate and take direction, but in the end there is very little work done on personal development. While learning from the process of creation is the goal, the end result is a finished group show. Learning about this program made me even more excited about the potential of a permanent annual exchange



program which could support and be supported by a parallel performance based program.

Crescer e Viver has seen many foreign students come ask to be part of PROFAC, their professional training program, or simply be able to practice under the beautiful big top tent. Because of the success of the program, CeV is well-known and attractive to traveling students. I noticed that every week a student would come by the tent from Chile or Mexico, or other Latin American countries asking if they could train in the tent. The direction of CeV wants to be able to invite everybody to be able to take part, but there is simply not the space, or the infrastructure to do so. When they have in the past, programs have been overcrowded and local students have lost out. The students who voluntarily show up then take the training provided and are not required to offer anything in return. There is so much potential in this type of exchange, but it can only be effective if it is monitored and supervised. CeV cannot provide free training without its students benefiting at all. The idea, after all, is that the school should be as sustainable as possible.

Objectives and Activities

My objectives going to Rio were clear, but in the first few weeks of my time I was not getting the information I had hoped to be able to get. Everybody was always running around very busy, far too busy to talk. Those who did have time simply didn't know the answers I was looking for. I surveyed anybody I could find about what exchange programs had taken place, what had worked or not, and what they thought was needed. Originally I had thought the exchange program would be for the youth in the social circus program, but most of these kids are under 18, too young to travel unaccompanied, and in my observation did not have the drive or maturity to take such a project seriously. Spending time with the people in the professional training program made me see that this is where such a program would be the most valuable. It also helps that all the schools within FIC also have two to three year-long professional training programs, therefore a student could take a parallel semester at another school and it would still fit within their curriculum. The story of a young man convinced me that this was the way the project had to be. My new objective became making a program that would benefit both the schools within FIC and their sustainability and the communication within the international network of circus schools, and also special individuals like Leonardo Freitas.

I met Leo and his sister Leticia on my second day at Crescer e Viver, when a British sponsor of Action for Brazil's children was filming his family's story to re-make their promotion video about the projects they sponsor. I got to go to their house and hear his mother tell their story. Leo's family had lived in a city three hours from Rio. The family was watching news one day when a story about Crescer e Viver came on, and peaked the interest of both children and parents. One day on a visit into Rio to visit family, the kids came to try a day at social circus. The kids loved it and begged to be able to come back. Despite the distance, the family saved money to be able to send the kids on weekends to practice circus, and they soon became involved and good enough to perform. As the years went by their commitment to CeV grew and they began to come to practices during the week, which took them away from time doing homework and helping with chores at home. By the time Leo and Leticia were 16 and 17 they were clear that circus was what they wanted to do. Despite the family's limited resources, their parents left their jobs, and moved to Rio so that the kids could continue circus training without having to sacrifice studying for school

or helping at home. The joy that I saw in Leo's eyes when he told the camera crew about his love for circus made me know that there are people whose lives can be changed by offering kids like Leo a next step option. Leo is now in the PROFAC program, and one of the most talented jugglers I know. I knew I wanted to make the program happen for Leo and others like him; I just needed to figure out how.

Finding out about FIC and CRECE-Sur about a month and a half after my arrival helped cement the ideas which I had floating around in my head. Keeping busy, however, did not necessarily encourage their development. During my time in Rio, I spent 6 days a week at the Crescer e Viver tent, working with the social circus program from 2pm-6pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (11am-3pm). The other days I was invited to work with a group of 7 adults with disabilities. I knew nothing about the program, but it had been initiated in January in collaboration with a Theatre called Graeae in London, England. Jenny Sealy, director of the company that employs artists with disabilities, choreographed the 2012 Paralympic games opening ceremony, and wanted to share some of the work done with the next city to host the games. A British/Brazilian company called the People's Palace Project helped initiate the collaboration by bringing over 5 artists with disabilities, Jenny, and an aerial coach to work with 5 Brazilians selected by Crescer e Viver. When I arrived in January and activities started again at the circus after the holidays, the Brazilian artists had had about a month of training; two weeks with the British artists and two weeks by themselves. I was introduced to them, and invited to observe. Being who I am, I jumped right in and started playing and giving tips. Before I knew it I was being asked to lead warm-ups, and work with the artists on aerial acts. I soon became close friends with the group, and found myself looking forward to training with them, as I was learning just as much about them as they were with me.

Though I was not expecting to, I attached myself this group of strong, young artists. It is not part of the project I was intending to do, but one that I soon found unavoidable, as my heart had already been stolen. That being said, I cannot tell my story without telling theirs. Andre, a 31-year-old man is both a professional surfer and paraplegic. He had a motorcycle accident 13 years ago which left him unable to move his body below his sternum, but not unable to move forward in life. Having always had a knack for extreme sports, Andre found a surfing school that taught people with disabilities. He soon figured out how to adapt a board to his body, and is surfing some of the longest waves today. When I met him he was just learning to use the aerial silks, and had been practicing moved with them tied together in a sling. As I have worked for many years on silks, I was intrigued to see what Andre could do with his incredible upper body strength. He ended up being an exceptional student, exceeding everyone's expectations, and teaching me once again that in the circus, there are no limits.

At the end of my stay in Brazil, the time was also approaching for the group to go to London to put the show together for the Circus Festivals in London and Rio. The artistic Director Vinicius Daumus asked me to come along. I agreed to go, knowing that I could be useful to the students, and that this exchange would help give me insight into the program I will be establishing. I continued recording my extended circus journey on the blog I had started for my time in Rio⁵, and this is now integrated into my learning about the nature of Crescer e Viver and the process of collaboration and multi-cultural exchange.



Reflections and Results

This unexpected turn of events was fateful. Before leaving Brazil I was able to come up with a proposal for VIACIRCO exchange written in Spanish and Portuguese, and had it read and approved by co-founders Junior and Vinicius to send out to the other directors of FIC for approval. While in London, I was waiting for the list of the director's emails to contact them. After arriving in London with the group and starting rehearsals for their collaborative show 'Belonging,' I learned that Donald Lehn, head of FIC was in town for a conference. Vinicius set up a meeting and I was able to show Donald the proposal I had written. He gave me a lot of good feedback, and promised to present it to the directors when they met during the circus festival in Rio in May. When they did meet, I was already back in Montreal. All of the directors approved to move forward with the program, and Felicity Simpson, director of Circo Para Todos in Colombia offered to partner with me in the project. She got in touch with me at the end of May, and we are currently looking at different funding opportunities.

Observations and Contributions

I can offer these comments only as observations, knowing that it sometimes takes an outside eye to catch what might be a current or future challenge. I came to CeV with a theory that there might be a challenge (stagnancy and lack of funding for expansion) and with an idea for a potential solution (an exchange program), but wanted the design to be driven by the need of the organization and the people within it. It is all well and good to implement an aid program that I think useful, but it can only be truly effective if it is believe to be useful to the community in which it is based. I offered my skills of observation, with my background knowledge in circus and Latin American studies to figure out how we could allow the students of these circus schools to travel, train, and learn more.

Upon arrival I was happy to observe that as expected, the programs offered are well established, well known, and supported within the community. I was surprised by how long the kids trained everyday, especially in the intense heat. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays kids came either by themselves or accompanied by a group of friends, siblings, or parents. All children had to be enrolled ahead of time, or if it was their first day they were allowed to join and requested to have forms sent home and signed by parents or guardians. Most arrived early or on time, as there was a rule in affect that if you arrived 15 minutes late you would not be allowed to join for that day. There were three teachers for social circus, no matter how many kids came that day. Generally it would run between 15-25, except on Saturdays, when fewer kids came. Troupes were divided by age, or in some special cases, ability. For example, there was a young boy, who was very talented and able to do all of the tumbling passes that troupe 2 could do, and therefore to encourage his learning, he was moved up. This organization worked well because students were provided continuity with their teachers, and could therefore improve on specific skills.

At the beginning of January, I noticed that during the break in the middle of class some kids brought a snack, but many didn't. Over the next few days it became apparent that the kids who came from families with money brought a small snack, but many of the them came from families who couldn't buy any. Not only did this make things very unfair, but also inhibited the growth and learning of students without food. I know that if I came directly from school, and was asked to do strenuous exercise that required high amounts of focus, I would not be able to last four hours without a snack. I mentioned this observation in a meeting with Vinicius, and he said sometimes when they have funding, they provide a healthy snack, but sometimes they simply don't. The next week however, I was pleasantly surprised to see all of the students offered sandwiches and juice. This showed me two things: one that they had the budget, and two that they are responsive to feedback. The result was interesting in the end. One day, the kids were offered a *vitamina*, or a fruit smoothie as their snack. Many of them didn't like the way it tasted, and began to complain, asking for the jam sandwiches they had the week before. One student (who was always very loud) expressed loudly that the food was disgusting and she didn't want it. The teachers then had to explain that they were spending their small budget trying to find varied, healthy food, so that they could provide them with something every week. This behavior of complaining is one I saw often. Many times I saw students talking back to their teachers, misbehaving, and being rude or unruly. While this is normal behavior for kids to a certain extent, it seems that the teachers had not yet found an effective way to teach the students what behavior is appropriate. They made a list of rules themselves, but still hit each other, called each other names, and got in front of each other

in line. Many of the students come from very difficult home situations, and those who don't, learn from those who do about how to get what they want. The psychologist on the pedagogical team was in charge of speaking to the students who broke the rules, and did so in a gentle, and respectful way. It could be that I was not there long enough to see any progression in the behavior of the students, but I would hope that respect would become more of a priority to them.

As an aerial performer and teacher, I am always aware and critical of how people install equipment. I noticed immediately that rigging was generally done well with safe practices, but without necessary back-up precaution. The ropes were old and needed to be replaced, and permanent, single-point installations were not given back-ups. However, on first glance it seemed that the teachers and students who knew how to do the rigging were the ones doing it, and that it was done with relative care and safety. One day, however, during an afternoon of social circus, there was a group of students learning aerial fabric. They were taking turns executing a drop to a single ankle, which ended upside-down. As I walked by the group, I noticed that the carabineer attaching the rope to the mast, was stuck in an open position, reducing the breaking strength of the carabineer. At this moment, another instructor was walking by, and I pointed it out to him to not call out the instructor in front of her students. Instead of telling the student to come down off of the fabric and teaching the students what could have been done to avoid this potentially very dangerous situation, he pulled down on the rope and screwed the carabineer shut, putting both the student and himself in danger. This, and the fact that it was not screwed shut in the first place, showed me a general lack of knowledge within the instructors. Once again, when I mentioned this to Vinicius, he responded appropriately, and asked if I could give a rigging workshop. I agreed, and asked my father, a professional rigger and instructor, to do the workshop with me when he came to visit. We gave a nine-hour workshop on aerial rigging and safety, offered to the PROFAC students and all instructors over 3 days. It was great that Vinicius had the initiative to ask us to do this in response to my observation, but unfortunately, the teachers who I thought would most benefit, only attended a few hours, and did not show interest or that they thought they needed instruction in the area. This was a disappointment to me. I felt just like the attitude of the students who seemed unwilling to change and learn and grow in their behavior, this was also reflected in some of the instructors.

The offices at Crescer e Viver are located just outside the tent, with a collection of desks for the coordinators and administrators, surrounded by offices for the directors and president. Although I was there temporarily, I hoped to be able to observe the inner workings of the administrative team, to learn how all levels of operation functioned. The coordinator welcomed me upon arrival, but didn't give me that much direction as to what she hoped for me to do during my time there. When I first arrived she told me specifically I should not attend a pedagogical meeting, when later I was asked to attend by Vinicius. It seemed to be a constant battle to be recognized by her as part of the team. She was new to the position at the time, but it took other people pointing out that I was available to help in order for her to assign me tasks. Finally I figured out the balance of how to avoid stepping on her toes, but also not allow her to limit my involvement. Communication with me, however, didn't seem to be where the problem stopped. When I did attend meetings which happened once a week, it seemed that the main source of tension or conflict was communication. I saw this from the direction to the coordination, to the administration to the instructors and finally to the students. It seemed that even though every

member of the team had good intentions, they were not all directed towards the same goal. Many of the team members had been there from the beginning, and some had been there less than a year. Newer members, however, sometimes held a higher position than those who had been there a longer time. This seems to have caused conflict in some situations. I believe that a more continuous presence of a strong leader may be one solution to the situation. Emotions were often tense, and if it had been an open and comfortable space for people to express their needs, conflicts may have been able to resolve themselves. I saw one example of a very productive meeting when this occurred, among just the instructors, and felt that if these people were able to show this way of communicating, maybe the team could become more united. My intention with these observations is to inspire growth. I hope that these observations and the techniques that I brought to the students and teachers of Crescer e Viver can be helpful and productive. The more effective a leadership team is, the more the students will learn about positive team work, communication, and respect.

Despite these challenges, I feel that I accomplished what I set out to do. I was able to teach the students new techniques and tricks and lead activities. I wrote an exchange program approved by the directors of FIC, which offers exchange opportunities and teaching experience to students in professional training programs within the circus schools of Iberoamerica. As a bonus, I even was privileged enough to help direct an incredible collaborative show with artists from Britain and Brazil.

Lessons Learned

I learned many things during my time with CeV. I learned about myself as a teacher and leader. While I really enjoyed my position teaching with troupe 1, the youngest group, I feel given my training and language ability, I would have been more useful teaching troupe 2. This group was working on skills I was confident both teaching and doing, and were old enough to be calmer, and could take direction. While I did get the opportunity to coach them for a few weeks when their normal teacher was not there, I did not ask to move for fear of what the other teachers would think. Normally I am not intimidated by people, but there was an attitude which I interpreted to mean they knew what they were doing and didn't want to be messed with. Upon reflection, I was there to help as much as possible, and therefore should have explained how I was feeling and asked to be changed to work with the more advanced group in order to make the best use of my skills.

Simply being present and witnessing the day-to-day operations, I really saw the value of communication and leadership. Each individual has a role to play, and it is important to make sure each player feels valued. There is a very talented coach who has been responsible for winning Olympic teams, but is not paid enough to make ends meet for him and his mother who he supports. He has explained this to his employers, and asked to take on more hours to be paid more, but so far nothing has been done. In my opinion he is of huge value to the school, but will not be able to stay there and keep coaching unless he is compensated in equal value for his work.

Conclusion

I am so grateful to have had this amazing opportunity to begin a project I have been dreaming of for a long time. I see this as the beginning of an endeavor that will last many years, and help many people have a ticket to their next step in life, out of the past and into a better future. While the experience was complex, with ups and downs, the result was better than I could have imagined. Working with disadvantaged youth in one of the most difficult parts of Rio de Janeiro gave me a real sense of the struggle that these children live every day. The joy and vitality that circus brings to their lives, is also clear. One sweet young girl around the age of 9 reached out to me telling me a story of how someone broke into their house while she was alone. Something reminded her of it, and she told me the story. Luckily she was not harmed, but I learned that she is often neglected, and left alone at home. The circus is a place where every child has their place. They learn and grow as a team, building self-confidence, and physical skills along the way. Most importantly they learn how to keep their bodies and minds healthy through exercise and eating well. Crescer e Viver saw the success of the programming and created the professional training program that is free of charge for all students. My aim is to create the next step in bringing these students to a career. I felt supported at all times by José Jouve-Martin, my faculty mentor who was always there to support me. I am proud of the work I have done with the help of the fellowship, and I know that there is a lot more to come.

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