

SE05E02

Dr. Alexander Coles

FSU Urban Risk Center

H: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

On today's episode we talk with Dr. Alexander Coles, a geologist, faculty member, and director of the Urban Risk Center at FSU Panama. Dr. Coles talks about his own experience studying abroad in the United States, the ways communities in the region have benefited from the Urban Risk Center, what makes FSU Panama a great place to study, and why he encourages all students to study abroad. Let's go to our conversation with Dr. Coles now.

Z: Hi Dr. Coles! How are you doing today?

C: I'm doing fine, thank you.

Z: Wonderful! Can you introduce yourself to our listeners? Just your name, where you're from, and what you teach at FSU Panama.

C: I'm Alexander Coles, I'm a geographer teaching and doing research at the FSU campus in the Republic of Panama. I was born in Costa Rica. I lived in Costa Rica most of my life, and then I went to the United States as a foreign exchange student back in 1970 where I learned English in Mission, Kansas. For a year I was there.

I didn't really get back to live in the US until I started my master's degree in Urban Regional Planning at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and then I continued with my studies on as a PhD (student) at the institute for Environmental Studies at the same university.

H: Can you tell us what it was like to study abroad in the United States for those graduate degrees? Did you experience any culture shock or notice any big cultural differences?

C: Not really, I mean I felt very comfortable, but I guess it was because the university was also very, very welcoming since we got there. First of all, we lived in University Housing; we had two children at the moment and the university had everything ready for us to be there. And many of the services that we thought we would have to go and look for were already being offered in the university system and in the housing university system: cleaning, you know, for children, and sports, and all of the benefits that you might need us as a graduate student. And also, it was a very international place, University Housing. You know, you met people from all over the world. That was a very nice, very nice experience. And it was a very safe place, also, for the children to

play and, you know, lots of playgrounds and you could have your dogs with you. It was like being at back at home again. You know, once we moved out of Madison, we really missed that environment. I've been by several times, just to visit and remember all these good times that we had.

Z: Yeah, that's wonderful that you were able to have sort of your own study abroad experience because so many of our students, I mean that's what this podcast is all about, is international education and just learning from different institutions and different places like FSU Panama or like, your experience that you had as well.

We know that you founded the Urban Risk Center in Panama. Can you tell us about the overall goals of the center?

C: Yes, let me tell you a little bit of history of the center and how it started, because remember that FSU Panama is a teaching center. I mean here the idea of doing research, which is one of the things that I really missed when I came here because previously, you know, I was able to do research and doing all these things, but it's full of teaching. And I said, 'Well, I don't know if I really want to continue only teaching'. I mean, I love teaching and I always wanted to be a professor or a teacher since I was a small kid, but I said that I need something else, I need to do something else. I need to establish more links with other institutions, work with other colleagues in other universities or research centers, and things like that.

So, I wrote a proposal that I presented to the board of directors of FSU in October of 2017. The proposal took me about two years to be completed. A lot of consulting with people previously, and I'm trying to manage all of, you know, my vision there, of the administration, of running the center, and, you know, having people at the center. All of these things that are parts of this type of adventure at that time.

The important thing is, OK, it was it was accepted it and I created it, but there was an issue right there. And it is that even though we at FSU Panama are under the academic umbrella of FSU Tallahassee; we are independently financed. You know, we have the resources limited for our institution, depending on tuition mostly. And therefore, the center was going to start with zero money. And so basically (it was) volunteer work, do work on your own, you're going to keep the same load of courses, if you want to do research you have to do it in extra time. I mean, those were the conditions. I said, well, you know, I'll take a risk, I will do it.

H: Can you tell us what the center does, like once y'all got off the ground, what are some of your goals?

C: The issue is that, you know, we being in a tropical environment that is going through a great deal of degradation, environmental degradation, and you know, a very unequal society as well, and very, how could I say, disorganized urban growth with lacking of urban planning in many cases, etc. You know our exposure to risk might be higher than, for example, you will have in Tallahassee. I mean we don't have the Hurricanes here, so far. I mean the northern part of

Panama, and part of Costa Rica might get a little bit of the wind, but not necessarily direct contact with that. But, we have lots of floods, we have lots of landslides, we have a great deal of contamination of waters because of mining, because of garbage, we don't have goods collection systems, garbage collection systems. Many of these informal settlements around the city do not have a service for garbage collection, etc. so everything goes into the rivers and then goes into the Bay of Panama etc. And that, you know, from an ecological point of view is very dangerous to etc.

So we say there is no center here that is really analyzing any of these things. You know, but then we thought: But are we going to work only in Panama? Because other countries in Central America might have the same problems or in South America. So, we decided from beginning to say this is original center. It is a center that is going to deal with understanding, explaining, communicating, and facilitating actions and work, to work in these lines of reducing risk, of risk reduction, and trying to explain to people that there are no such things as natural disasters. That disasters, we create the disasters. We create, with our actions, the conditions for something to happen. That something to happen my turn into a disaster. Let's say that a hurricane is a natural event, but perse it is not a disaster. It is a disaster because we decided to live in a place where we know that has a huge chance of being affected by hurricanes and that we don't want to move. And we say well, 'We will die here'.

So, we said well, we have to change the minds of people, you know, and make people more aware. Give people the material, maybe a teaching, that you have to realize that you live in a dangerous place, you know. There are things we can do about it. For example, if you live near to a river, why not tell the community or show the community how they can create an early warning system? (One) that is very cheap that, with their own means, and that that can save a lot of lives. You know, things like that.

So, we started working with this idea. And then the World Bank gave us a contract on doing an analysis of exposure to flood risk in two counties of the city of Panama, of the district of Panama. 62% of the flooding in the whole country occurs in that area. It is an area that has (been) devastated, basically. The wetlands, or built upon wetlands, a lot of communities, informal communities have been displaced to those areas. The facilities for, you know, for garbage collection, for water wastewater disposal, and all this, they don't exist yet. There are people living in very close and dense informal housing etc. So, these are areas that, at some point, are going to explode in violence. These are the areas that are going to, at some point, demand even more services and therefore will start closing roads, and putting barriers, and stopping traffic, and getting confrontation with police. And these people go, and they put him in jail for a long time, and they get back and their family doesn't exist, almost, anymore. I mean this is a whole issue right there. And with the issue of COVID, the density of these places with no water. You know, they have to go to the rivers or to the creeks to get water, or there is some service where they buy water that comes in, you know, in tanks for them to, you know. And the accumulation of all these people trying to get that water, etc., that provided the grounds for COVID, you know,

that COVID was looking for. And these are the areas where the worst cases of COVID had been shown, along the history of this pandemic.

Z: It sounds like very, not only interesting work, but important work and relevant work that you're doing at the Urban Risk Center and I think that it's very, very interesting.

C: Maybe I can tell you how it works because, you know, we don't have money from the university, but we work through these other senses, you know, for example the World Bank that hired us for that study. Then another institution from Japan, the Tokyo learning development center, did too for another study in order to improve neighborhoods, a division of poor neighborhoods, in order to, at some point, reach level of sustainability. You know but coming from there, not imposed, by the government but bottom of type of thing I mean things like that. So, what we have is that we work with affiliates, different professors from our campus, but as well from other university centers in Panama or research institutions in Panama. They become affiliated to the center because for them it is a lot easier to do research within this center because we don't have all of these administrative steps that the national centers have where they have to wait for approval of whoever is up there to start doing research. We are a straightforward center. We say OK do it here, if you have funding bring it here and we can help you. We can give you all, you know, we have an excellent staff in GIS, in geographic information systems, in all of the applications of GIS. That takes place right here at the geography studio which at the same time is this Center, the Urban Areas Center for our university. So, we're doing a great deal of collaboration with universities here in the city of Panama with universities in interior of Panama etc. and also with universities abroad and institutions abroad. So, we're sort of like a magnet, you know, that people get attracted to come here, do research, go back to their countries whatever. I mean that's how it's functioning.

H: Yeah, it sounds like you're building quite a network to be able to have that community and collaboration with other people to then go out into your individual communities and regions and really have a direct impact on people. So, it sounds like you all are doing absolutely great work.

H: We want to kind of shift a little bit, now, and ask you. So, we know that you've been with FSU Panama since 2005, can you tell us what makes FSU Panama such a great place for students to study?

C: Well, first of all is our campus is located on grounds of the city of knowledge and it's a beautiful sight. Shared with other educational programs, research centers, innovation projects, and several regional international development organizations. For example, the Latin American hub of the UN is here at the city of knowledge, which is very important. But one of the things that I truly love about our campus is that, you know, is that its an international and diverse place. Our small campus, you know, our building that is up is only a building having a capacity for to have the labs, the classrooms, and all these things. But it truly is a very diverse, international place. Panamanians meet and share time and space, fun and culture and knowledge with students from a diversity of countries. Coming from the United States, Brazil, Colombia,

Argentina, and even Russia, India, Japan, Central America, and the Caribbean. And that's just to mention some. And the students, you know, we require students to keep up with good grades. And it's very interesting how you can mold their minds. Some of them come to FSU and they don't know what they really want to study. Then they start taking courses in biology, and chemistry, and environmental sciences, in sociology, in all of these things, and that helps them decide, you know, very quickly what they want to do. And when they go to Tallahassee after two years, once they decide to go and finish over there, they have a pretty good idea, and still have the contact with us. The good thing is that we have very small groups and the interaction of the professors with these students is really close. I mean, we don't have that large number of students that we cannot take care of or take some time to sit down and talk to them. And I think the students love that, and we professors do like that too. It's a very friendly place. It's a very friendly place and it's very pleasant to work here as a as a faculty. It is very pleasant.

Z: That's wonderful! We love hearing about the diversity of FSU Panama and all the classes that are offered and the small class sizes. I think that that's really wonderful and it speaks also to, sort of, the philosophy of learning, of just taking lots of classes and figuring out what you want to do and, that's just so wonderful.

Z: We're going to move into our next question now so, what advice do you have for students who are considering studying abroad?

C: That well, the first thing is: go ahead! Don't think about it! I am a product of that, and I know, I know that once you go abroad your mind really opens. You start meeting people, you start being more, how could I say, more considerate about different cultures. You know, (you start to) appreciate the different cultures, or the people that, you know, that we grow up, at least in Costa Rica we grew up with a very narrow view in this matter; because Costa Rica, I mean, my grand scheme, my family from both sides were migrants from Italy and from England. But the majority of the people do not have exposure to other cultures. Here in Panama, because of the canal, it was different. You know, the French were here before the Americans, and the Americans then brought a lot of workers from different places to work in the canal, and they stayed here etc. You know and there was this mixture of races and cultures right here. But it's still, you know, the new generations do not really, I don't think they really appreciate that. But when they go abroad and they have to deal, now differently, you know, outside their home then this whole new opportunity spectrum, opportunities and knowledge begins. And I think that's what I always tell the students.

You know, I tell you, I feel really sad when one of my assistants at the URC, we paid students for assistantships in the URC with the few resources that we have, he said, 'professor I'm sorry, I'm going to Tallahassee' and I said, 'Well I'm very sorry too, but go ahead!' You know, some of them might be irreplaceable because I do a very good screening when I offer students an internship, but I also understand that it is for their own good for their future to go to Tallahassee and then get involved in this system that works differently than ours, but also it has much more many opportunities than our small global (center) here in Panama. So, I'm always for it, I will support

that. I write letters of recommendations, even if they go to other universities because sometimes, they decide to go to Europe or any other US university or South America or whatever. And, in my case, I always drive very nice letters of recommendations for them to feel that, you know, that they can still have my support even when they are out. Sometimes they write me: 'Professor what do you think of this? Could you review this for me please?' I say 'OK, if I have time, I'll do it'. But I will do it, you know, and send the comments and things like that. They keep these types of relationships with us. So, that's nice, I like that. I never had it in any other university that I worked, you know, at that level at least, because they were large universities, and it was more difficult to do that.

Z: Absolutely, it's wonderful that you could have that relationship with your students and that you support them going on to other things in different places to expand their worldview, as well, because we believe that that's what study abroad is all about! And thank you so much for talking with us today! We've had a really great time hearing about you, and the Urban Risk Center, and FSU Panama.

C: Alright well, it was a pleasure, you know, and please come by and visit us some time!

Z: Definitely!

H: Thanks Dr. Coles.

Z: Before we disembark, let's talk about Hispanic and Latinx Heritage Month! September 15th through October 15th is Hispanic and Latinx Heritage Month. First introduced as a commemorative week, the celebration is now a month long and recognizes the contributions of the Latinx community.

H: International Programs is celebrating by amplifying the voices of Latinx study abroad alumni. Check out the Noles Abroad blog for various resources and stories from Latinx students and faculty who have studied and taught abroad. There you can listen to past episodes of the podcast featuring Latinx students and alums, read blog posts featuring Latinx faculty, and learn about the history of Hispanic Heritage Month.

Outro:

Z: Thank you to Dr. Coles for sharing your story and to all of you for listening!

Credits:

H: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey, who also does our sound engineering. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Hannah Meister and Zoë Crook.

