

Renée Ramirez
Lumos Travel Award
Panamá 2022-2023
Final Report



Projects with Fundación Calicanto

Fundación Calicanto is a Panamanian nonprofit dedicated to reducing gender inequality through psychological and economic empowerment programs. My year-long Lumos project with Calicanto was focused on program and organizational development. Throughout the year, I developed and passed off two internal processes serving key programming areas. I approached each process from a design thinking perspective, carefully gathering context and input from both the Calicanto team and the beneficiaries involved. Each process was accompanied by detailed SOP documentation, custom-made data tracking spreadsheets, roll-out presentations, visual graphs of implementation processes, and regular check-ins post-implementation.

In addition to the two processes I developed for the foundation, I took on the development of a strategic development initiative, Academia Calicanto. A digital learning platform packaging Calicanto's empowerment courses to sell to local businesses as a workforce development tool. Pairing my business development background and love for the nonprofit world, this project has allowed me to develop an additional revenue stream for Calicanto while further advancing its impact. The last couple of months have been full of foundational development: building a platform prototype, designing a customer discovery plan and resources, conducting research, and planning the development scope of the project.

Alongside these three main projects, I supported the Calicanto team by writing regular program reports, taking photos of events, writing blog posts, and providing website support. Throughout my time working with Fundación Calicanto, I was able to participate in formal leadership development seminars, gender-based violence workshops, and design thinking seminars taught in Spanish by local professionals. The additional experiences added a lot of value to my work, equipping me with more education and tools to contribute positively to the field of gender equality.

Throughout my time working with Calicanto, I have seen the deep capacity for resilience we hold as human beings and the importance of psychological support when working in community development. From having conversations with women in our programs, to working alongside alums who are now established community leaders, to reflecting on my challenges, I have been continually inspired by the way appropriate tools and community support give us the ability to move forward or, seguir adelante, and create a new path. A strength of Calicanto's programming and a beautiful aspect of Panamanian culture is that you don't have to go on that journey alone.



Project Highlight | Redesign of the Monitoring and Evaluation Process

After participants complete the 7-week empowerment course, CAPTA, they transition to Conexiones, a secondary program that conducts follow-up and offers additional resources such as seminars, workshops, and community events. Revising and redesigning the follow-up process, also known as Seguimientos, was my first project with Fundación Calicanto. Having never been intentionally designed and enduring a rapid transition to digital implementation during the pandemic, the Seguimientos process was full of potential but needed major restructuring at the beginning of 2022.

Previously, our programming team would spend close to two full weeks trying to reach and individually interview 30 graduates of the CAPTA program every few months. The survey questions asked were intended to track the positive psychological impact alumni experienced over time, but did little more than provide a snapshot of an individual's emotional and psychological state at the time of the phone call. In addition, the survey asked repetitive questions that while important, were not related to the program's scope of impact. Though each interview included an assessment from a psychologist, the Seguimientos (follow-up) process did not have defined or quantifiable success indicators to track the impact of the empowerment program over time. Our team was spending weeks painstakingly collecting information that did very little to help us understand the short or long-term impact of our program.

My approach was to understand the current system and the implementation team's pain points and processes. Because a large part of the CAPTA course is focused on psychological empowerment, I spent time learning about the program's methodology to develop an accurate approach to tracking positive psychological impact. After gathering context and conducting research over 6 weeks, I compiled potential solutions, tested them within focus groups, and eventually implemented a new program design, cutting time spent on implementation by more than 70%.

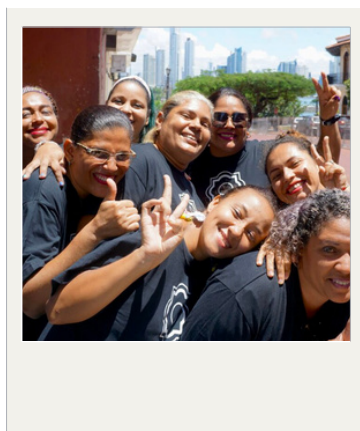
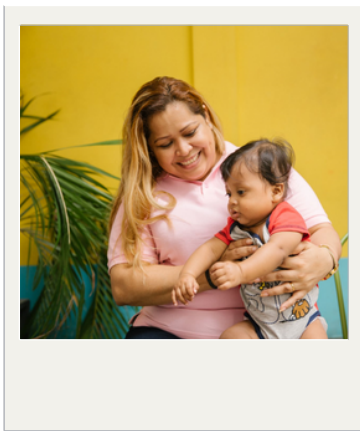
Instead of individual phone calls, the process was redesigned as a digital cohort reunion. Meeting over Zoom at three intervals over six months, cohorts would play games, engage in small group discussions, and fill out the impact tracking survey directly within the call. This format provided space for them to communicate upcoming events, offer one-on-one psychological counseling, and share important reminders in addition to gathering data on the program's impact. Quantifiable performance indicators were defined to track psychological and economic impact over time and the surveys were revised to concisely collect that key information.

Program Redesign Work Summary

- Conducted contextual research, interviewed team members directly and indirectly involved in the program, and hosted focus groups with beneficiaries.
- Revised key performance indicators, determining the content, structure, and method of the data we collect.
- Designed presentations, program flows, operating documents, and engagement resources to support the implementation of their new program format for 4 follow-up intervals.
- Wrote discussion questions, designed engagement activities, module outlines, and pre + post checklists across 4 follow-up intervals for both their female and male programs.
- Built custom spreadsheets with automated graphs to organize and communicate cohort data.
- Organized all implementation resources on Google Drive.
- Presented all resources to our team in Spanish.
- Provided direct support to the implementation team for the first cohort cycle and revisions as needed.

Included in the following pages is a blog post I wrote for Fundación Calicanto to communicate the new Seguimientos process with their external partners and audiences. A Spanish version was posted to the Calicanto website and can be accessed [here](#).





The Post-CAPTA Journey, from a Beneficiary to Community Member

[Para leer en español haga clic aquí](#)

I wish you could listen in on one of Calicanto's Seguimientos calls - our new follow-up process for graduates of CAPTA. Meeting on zoom over a period of six months, graduates respond to impact surveys, participate in games, and reconnect with their cohort. It has been such a privilege to get to know these resilient women through what they share in the small group environment. Some are working diligently to make their business profitable, caring for a sick family member, rebuilding their lives after divorce, or excitedly sending their child off to university. Though virtual, the environment is warm and empathetic with women readily offering words of encouragement or wisdom to each other. "I feel like I am in family" remarked Yumico, a CAPTA 60 graduate at the end of our most recent call.

The design of the follow-up process hinges on the premise that facilitating environments for graduates to support and affirm each other is a strategic way of reinforcing the empowerment principles learned throughout CAPTA. Along with receiving support from the foundation, you can hear from your friend, perhaps even your neighbor who shares valuable understanding of your struggles, goals, and contexts. Alumni are provided a space to connect with other women doing the same disciplined work of integrating mature conflict resolution, healthy coping mechanisms, and resilience in their day-to-day lives.

Structuring our monitoring and evaluation process in a community-sustaining way creates a pathway for women to grow into community members and leaders. Even if it is just for an hour, a space for graduates to share what is on their minds and provide support for each other, reinforces the psycho, social, and emotional empowerment experienced through CAPTA. It places them in an environment where they are first and foremost people; separating who they are from their circumstances and interrupting internal narratives of victimization. Instead of being just a beneficiary, they are a listening friend. Instead of being at the mercy of their circumstances, they are empowered individuals. Instead of being defined by the countless, limiting labels our society places on women - they have a place of belonging and have something valuable to offer.

They are in short, a woman whose voice matters and isn't that what empowerment is all about?

For our team, this new process has added much needed structure to the Conexiones program, greatly reducing their workload while increasing the quality of their interactions with graduates. Our team spends less time trying to track down graduates, and more time building relationships and providing support to alumni. Additionally, there is more clarity on what the Conexiones program actually offers with designated space within each call to communicate the scope of resources available to graduates, share upcoming events, and make an appointment with a psychologist. Our graduates have a clear understanding of what resources are available to them as alumni, increasing the likelihood of long-term involvement in the foundation.

There is no need to overstate the innovation of this new program, it is simply designed and straightforward in application. What makes it special, is that the format meets our alumni's needs for a greater network of support as they put into practice new life skills. Whether they are experiencing difficulty, seeing success, or working to create positive change in their lives they are not alone. At Calicanto, we are supporting long lasting impact through the fostering of long lasting relationships, one Seguimientos call at a time.

Renée Ramirez

Visiting Fellow and Development Manager at Fundación Calicanto



Professional Takeaways

My Spanish has improved tremendously over the last year. Working in an almost completely Spanish environment has increased my professional vocabulary and confidence exponentially. I have seen such a progression in my comprehension, speaking, and writing skills over the last year. At the beginning of my fellowship, I rarely spoke unless I had drafted out what I wanted to communicate beforehand and would do the majority of my work in English first and then translate it into Spanish. A year later, I am writing program reports directly in Spanish, giving presentations, building deeper relationships with program participants and my team, and surprising myself with the ease with which I can collaborate in meetings. Though I grew up in a Spanish-speaking household, improving my language skills for professional contexts was one of my primary goals during my Lumos project. After a year of working, language lessons, self-study, and speaking with friends, I have a better grasp on grammar, slang, and more native ways of speaking.

I was fortunate to work alongside and learn from the Executive Director of Calicanto, Gabriela, throughout my project. As my manager, I experienced her professional excellence firsthand and have learned some key organizational, leadership, and project management skills from her that have helped me to level up my work style. I have a greater awareness of my blindspots when approaching development projects and an arsenal of practical organizational tools to structure, track, and communicate the breadth of my work. Observing her leadership style in managing a mostly remote team post-pandemic has been a lesson in assertive communication, intentionality, setting clear expectations, and empowerment.



Personal Takeaways

While working and living in Latin America has been a long-term goal of mine, moving to Panama was not without its challenges. The experience of settling in a different country introduced me to a slew of experiences that have greatly stretched and shaped me. In the first couple of months, accomplishing daily tasks such as finding a mechanic or setting up a phone contract in another language were real difficulties. The daily consistency of small challenges over this last year (and a couple of large ones) grew a deep resilience, assertiveness, and self-assuredness in me. I was outside of my comfort zone for the majority of my time in Panama but the challenge of it all delighted me.

The result has been a lot of growth. I learned to advocate for myself and to trust my instincts. I learned to intentionally think about what I want to communicate before speaking. Working within a different culture taught me to consider the lens through which my audience might perceive what I say or do which, in turn, has taught me to approach interactions with more humility and curiosity.

Introducing myself constantly pushed me to communicate assertively, retire my fear of talking too much, and share openly about my experiences and perspectives. I am friendlier, more communicative, and intentional in how I interact with people which I am positive is due to the kindness of Panamanian culture. Finally, starting fresh in a new country has taught me that I can indeed change. While my values have remained, my goals, habits, hobbies, and how I relate to people have all changed for the better. Being in a new environment provided the space and fresh perspective that I needed to examine the way I had been living and make changes that were more aligned with the person I am and hope to be.

Life in Panamá

Living in Panama for a year was such a gift. The country is rich in history, culture, and diversity which made it such a fascinating place to be. I received so much generosity and hospitality throughout this past year and am truly touched by the kindness and care my new friends and their families showed me. I learned to surf, cook traditional Panamanian dishes, went free diving in Las Perlas, collected fresh fruit from my friend's mangoes trees, learned to play volleyball, and picked up a lot of slang. I am getting connected to the restaurant and food scene; learning about sustainable fishing and circular cooking, produce native to Panama, the coffee industry, and the richness of the food world in Central America.

Panama is smaller than Tennessee but the diversity of its landscapes - whether it's the Pacific or Caribbean oceans, San Blas Islands, mountains of Boquete and el Valle de Anton or even Causeway in the city - is beautiful.





Personal Growth and Future Plans

It was such a privilege to have received the Lumos award and been funded to work for a full year in Panama. I applied for the Lumos grant to gain experience working in the field of international development in Latin America. While I certainly achieved that with a year of rich cultural and professional experiences under my belt, I also gained a lot more. The opportunity to move to Central America allowed me to connect with my heritage in a meaningful way. I grew by leaps and bounds in my Spanish abilities, which has been a life-long learning process with major implications for my ability to connect with my family, culture, and successfully work in Latin America. Both the energizing and difficult experiences of this last year taught me about the types of work I am best suited for, the communities I hope to serve in the future, and the most authentic ways for me to contribute to the health and well-being of my neighbors.



As I look forward to the next steps in my career, I have a clearer understanding of my professional strengths and interests. I learned that while I have a high capacity for development and strategic planning, I truly thrive in people-facing environments and have a solidified desire to combine my love for teaching, food-based businesses, and entrepreneurship to serve migrant women in Latin America. I have accepted a part-time position as Development Manager with Fundación Calicanto and will continue to explore roles in the food and nonprofit world in the coming year. I hope to continue my education with a master's program in the next couple of years but for now, will happily continue living in Panama, tinkering with my Spanish, and exploring the surrounding beauty of Central America.

I would like to extend a sincere thank you to Shauna Walsh and the Lumos committee, Belmont University, Gabriela Valencia and the Fundación Calicanto team, my academic mentors: Dr. Jose Gonzalez, Dr. Marieta Velikova, Dr. Jeff Cornwall, Dr. Mark Schenkel, and my community in Nashville. I am so grateful for your guidance, support, and encouragement over these last few years and throughout my time in Panama. Couldn't have done this without you.

All my best,
Renée Ramirez



If you're interested in learning more about Fundación Calicanto and their work in Panama, you can explore via the links below or at fundacioncalicanto.org



