At this Science and Justice Cocktail Hour, visiting scholars Rachel Tillman and Javier Aguirre (Universidad Industrial de Santander) joined us to discuss how to encourage cross-disciplinary, justice-oriented research within universities. They are hoping to form a center at their university that will bring about institutional change and were hoping to learn from the experience of our Science and Justice Research Center. Rachel and Javier were especially interested in how to structure and organize research in the domain of science and justice and create a space for its development.

Rachel and Javier began the Cocktail Hour by talking about the Colombian context. Colombia has a history of social injustice and social inequality, in part because of historical dependencies on the global north. Colombia has primarily been an exporter of natural resources, and the extractive economy has shaped the way that citizens relate to the state. Science and engineering in Colombia have been connected with extractive industries, such as petroleum, but they are increasingly being viewed as holding the potential for a different path to development. One idea that Colombian politicians have supported would create science and technology research parks that could attract international corporations, but such a set up may reproduce dependencies on the global north, and there is no guarantee that the research would benefit Colombians. Research in the humanities and social sciences have not been a focus for most Colombian universities, and in the past, they were brought in as a complement to the applied research done by science and engineering. The emphasis on science and engineering in promoting new development might be seen as an opportunity to reinvigorate social science and humanities research, especially around the question of social justice in development projects.

An important question for Colombian development is how to build a post-extractive economy. It is not clear what that would look like. Could resources be considered communal? If so, what would that entail? This issue is complicated by underdevelopment, which still feels like a very real problem for many Colombians. Many people, politicians included, believe that education will help. According to Javier, there is a sense that science can empower people and allow them to see themselves as citizens. Marcia Ochoa, a professor from Feminist Studies, added that science has been an important frame for understanding the geography and self-making of Colombians going back to Alexander von Humboldt. She urged us to think more broadly about self-making and science and technology and modernity in Colombia. In terms of the question of citizenship, there are deeply marginalized people who want to participate but who are barred from doing so, in part because their theories of power and science are not recognized as legitimate. In her own research, she has tried to honor the narratives that transgender women use to describe the process of bodily transformation through hormones. She sees this as a first step towards transforming the institutions that that person has interactions with, such as the university or medical settings. Fundamentally, this is a question of how to bring epistemic diversity to the university. A center like Science and Justice may be a good first step, but it would be interesting to think about how to expand this model.

We went on to discuss some of the more practical aspects of establishing an interdisciplinary center. The center that Rachel and Javier have in mind would be primarily for graduate students and faculty, because they work on the same research projects. Tracy Ballinger,
a 2013 Science and Justice Center fellow, said that she thought the graduate seminar works well, because it isn’t a massive commitment and it allows students to connect with researchers from other parts of campus. Lizzy Hare, also a 2013 fellow, said that she felt that the class was a good introduction to the Center and the Working Group, because it provides a common language and makes it less intimidating to join the ongoing conversations. Colleen Massengale, the Center’s administrator said that she likes the Center’s practice of introducing ourselves individually at events, which facilitates dialogue because people have a better sense of who they are speaking with. Jake wanted to point out that providing food and drink is actually very important for building conviviality and developing networking skills. Taking breaks to eat and drink allows people to have individual side conversations that can then contribute back to the larger group discussion.

Rachel and Javier were concerned that scientists might not be interested in participating in an interdisciplinary group with humanities scholars. The Science and Justice Center has been successful in fostering relationships across campus divisions. Jake attributes this in part to taking advantage of funding mandates that require scientists engage with ethics or broader impacts. By working with the center, scientists are able to fulfill these requirements in an intellectually stimulating way, and it benefits the center by providing funding and institutional support that might otherwise be unavailable.