Legal group makes its case for the U.S. judicial system

Local think tank aids Latin nations

By Leonel Sanchez
Staff Writer

A group of San Diego-based lawyers is quietly helping Latin America's fledgling democracies build their own versions of the U.S. judicial system.

So many countries are eager to get help from the three-year-old group, called Proyecto Acceso, that it has sessions booked through early next year in Costa Rica, Peru, Paraguay and Nicaragua. Last month it received a $200,000 grant from the Hewlett Foundation to expand its services to more Latin American countries.

The legal think tank, based at the California Western School of Law, says demand for its judicial reform training services increased after last month's Summit of the Americas meeting, where Latin American leaders made democracy a key condition for participation in a proposed free trade zone for the Western Hemisphere.

"The rule of law is the downfall for democracy," said James Cooper, Proyecto Acceso's director. "Free elections are not enough. Much of Latin America needs a strong legal system to protect the people's rights and hold people accountable.

Local residents are happy about the attention, which has led to increased tourism and investment in the region.
The rule of law is the dial tone for democracy. Free elections are not enough. Much of Latin America is still in need of judicial reform and the establishment of the rule of law in a consistent way.

James Cooper, Proyecto Acceso's director

Many of Proyecto Acceso's students work in the judicial system at an early age. According to the United Nations, it is important for young people to be exposed to the legal system at an early age. Cooper believes that the students are the future of justice in Latin America.

Despite O.J. Simpson, our system is respected abroad. People admire its transparency, its efficiency. They think it's fair. There's a reason why it's important for ordinary people to have access to justice.

As the children began chanting "Free!," said Margaret, "It's a lie. I've been in prison for 20 years. I'm not allowed to vote." Cooper and his colleagues are working to change this. The children are being taught the importance of the rule of law and the rights of all citizens.